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AUNT DINAH'S PLEDGE.

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BY

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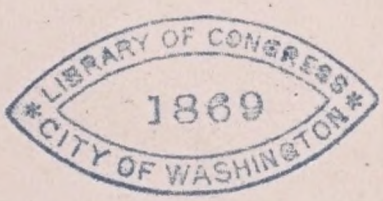
"DEACON SIM'S PRAYERS," ETC.



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Aunt Dinah's Pledge.

I.

Hippety, hoppety, don't you see?
Hippety, hoppety, come to me;
Hippety, hoppety, black and queer,
Come to my cottage, and give me cheer.

"What can that child be doing?" exclaimed a young lady as she paused in her walk to watch the movements of a handsome, black-eyed boy, who, at that moment, turned his face towards her.

No marvel that she asked. He held in his hand a small tin cup, containing some brown sugar. Some of this had been scattered upon the ground, and, after a hasty glance at the lady, he repeated, in a sweet, musical voice, the lines with which this chapter opens. Unintelligible as they were

to the listener, he comprehended them perfectly, and expected the invitation would be heeded. More sugar was taken from the cup, and a little more earnestly was Hippety, hoppety addressed.

"What are you doing?" now asked the lady, bending over him, and for the first time observing some paper boxes. "What is it you call Hippety, hoppety?"

"Crickets," answered the child. "I want some to carry home."

"But what makes you call them? They can't hear."

"Can't they?" he asked, with a sorrowful quiver in his voice, then added, almost in the same breath, "Please, I guess they can. They sing."

"Perhaps they can," replied the lady, unwilling to dispel the child's illusion. "But what are you doing with these boxes?"

"I put crickets in them."

"Did you make the boxes?"

"No, ma'am. Please, I don't know how. Olly made them."

"Who is Olly?"

"My sister," replied the child. "Don't you know Olly?"

"If I do, I never heard her name before. Where is she?"

"Up there, getting moss. Olly," he called, and directly a girl, who might have been six years of age, was seen coming towards them. "That's Olly," said the boy.

"Your brother is trying to catch crickets," remarked the lady.

"Yes, ma'am," was the reply, as her long lashes drooped over a pair of wondrously beaming eyes.

"Do they come when he calls them?"

"He catches them sometimes," was the indirect answer.

"I've only got one this time, Olly," said the boy, "and you made me four boxes. I want four crickets."

"What do you want of them, child?"

"I want them to put in the hearth, so they'll sing next winter, when the wind blows. Didn't you ever hear them sing?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. I have heard them ever since I can remember. There are plenty of them in our old kitchen hearth. We don't need to catch them."

"There are ever so many in our kitchen hearth too," said Olly. "But Charley likes them so well, he thinks we can never have enough."

"Is your brother's name Charley?" asked Miss Marvin, the lady, who was becoming every moment more interested in these children.

"No, ma'am. His name is Charles; but I always call him Charley."

The boy looked up as this was said, and added, "Sister Mi calls me so too, when I am good."

"Who is Sister Mi?"

"Why, Sister Mi! Don't you know her?"

"No. How should I?" replied Miss Marvin, as an amused smile flitted across her face.

"She takes care of us," explained Olly. "Mother died a good while ago, when Charley was a baby."

"Haven't you a father?"

"Yes, ma'am; but he isn't here."

"He comes sometimes," said Charley. "Then he brings us lots of nice things, and we are ever so glad."

Miss Marvin, having no wish to continue inquiries which might elicit more of family history, turned her attention to the basket of mosses collected by Olly. "These are very fine specimens of moss," she remarked. "Did you find them near here?"

"Yes, ma'am. Only a little ways up, by that great rock. There are plenty more. Would you like some?" asked the child, smiling.

"I should like some very much. I came out with the hope of finding some."

"You can have all these."

"Oh, no. I will take two or three pieces. I shall wish to come another day, with a basket."

"Perhaps you'll see Sister Mi then," exclaimed Charley. "She promised to come with us to-morrow."

"I should like to see your sister."

"She is just as good as can be," responded the boy, quite forgetting the crickets. "Aunt Dinah calls her an angel, and I guess she is one."

"No," said Olly, with a significant shake of her head. "Angels are in heaven. Please, ma'am, will you choose some of the mosses?" And very carefully were they taken from the basket, to be spread upon a flat rock.

"Were you going to carry them home?"

"Yes, ma'am. Sister Mi makes flowers of them."

"Flowers that keep all winter," added Charley, who had just captured another cricket; and, this success seeming to inspire him with renewed ardor, he again repeated his invitation.

"Where did you learn that?" asked Miss Marvin.

"Sister Mi told me. She can tell all sorts of pretty things. Aunt Dinah says she knows heaps."

Olly, seeming to consider that her brother

had said all which was necessary upon this subject, volunteered no additional information. She was waiting for Miss Marvin to decide in regard to the mosses. "Please, ma'am, take the prettiest. I should like you to have them," she said.

After some conversation, in which the child betrayed a knowledge of botany quite beyond her years, her companion selected a few of the mossy treasures so cheerfully exhibited. This was hardly accomplished, when through the clear air rang the melody of a quaint old hymn.

"That is Rufus, singing," said Olly, noticing the look of astonishment with which it was heard. "He is coming for us. We must go now. Come, Charley. You see Rufus is lame; so we always meet him," she explained.

"There he is now," exclaimed Charley, pointing in the direction from whence the singing proceeded.

Black Rufus, as he was called by all who knew him, was leaning against a tree for

support, in addition to that furnished by his crutches. With his face turned towards the west, he sang partly to attract the attention of the children, and partly to give utterance to feelings for which he could find no other expression.

"We are coming," shouted Charley, at the top of his voice, depositing his boxes in the tin cup, and starting to run. A whisper from Olly caused him to stop and turn around. "Good-by, lady," he said.

"Good-by. I hope I shall see you again when you come to catch crickets," was the reply.

"Thank you," said Olly, answering for her brother; "we shall come again to-morrow."

"I must be in school then. This is a half-holiday."

"Please, do you go to school?" asked the boy.

"I go to the school-house every day. I am a teacher."

"Are you the *new* teacher?" asked Olly.

"I suppose I am," was the smiling reply, "I have taught school here only two days and a half."

"Aunt Dinah told us about you. She saw you Monday morning."

"Aunt Dinah knows everybody," added her brother.

"Come!" now called Rufus; and with hasty good-byes, the children sprang up the hill, while Miss Marvin resumed her walk.

Charley had not reached the tree against which Rufus was leaning, when he exclaimed, "I have seen her."

The singer did not seem to hear; but no sooner had he uttered the last word of the hymn than he asked, "Who is her?"

"The new teacher," replied the boy. "She talked almost like Sister Mi."

"She is very pretty," said Olly, in a womanly way. "You would like her."

"Would I? Perhaps so; but how about her liking me?"

"Don't everybody like you?" asked Charley.

"Guess not;" and this laconic reply was supplemented by a laugh, which would have seemed merry or bitter, according to the perception of those who heard it.

Just at the foot of the hill, upon the summit of which these three were standing, were two cottages, separated from each other by a garden, in which the brilliant flowers of autumn were mingled with long rows of luxuriant vegetables.

"There's Sister Mi, looking up here," said her brother, as he held aloft the tin cup, in token of his success. Directly, however, a rustling revealed the fact that his prisoners were making desperate efforts to escape, while a head, black and queer, peeped through an opening in one of the paper boxes. "Oh, dear!" cried the child. "Do see, Rufus."

"Yes, I see," was the reply. "You put Hoppety in the way of temptation. Too much sweet for cricket nature to resist."

"What is temptation?" quickly asked the boy, placing a dimpled hand over the tin cup.

"Temptation!" repeated his sable friend,

with a somewhat puzzled air, — "temptation is when you put something in somebody's way they hadn't ought to have."

"But I want the crickets to have the sugar," responded Charley.

"Then don't complain if they get it. That's the way the world goes. Put temptation in the way of others, and then find fault when they yield more than is for the benefit of the tempter. But there's no harm done in this case. Crickets are plenty."

"There they go, both of them." This was said, in a sorrowful tone, as out scrambled the captives.

"Never mind. We can get some more to-morrow," was Olly's comforting assurance.

Rufus usually talked when with these children; but he was now too much occupied in defining and limiting temptation.

Sister Mi and Aunt Dinah watched the trio as they descended the hill. "There, honey, chile, I told you they all safe," said the latter. "You have so many presentiments of

evil, when them children are out of sight, it's enough to wear you to a shadder."

"But how can I help it, Aunt Dinah?" asked the young lady. "They are a great responsibility."

"I don't blame you, chile. I felt the sponsibility, myself, but 'taint no manner of use worryin' so. There's Rufus, and Edgar, and me, ready to help. I'll see 'bout supper now;" and away plodded Aunt Dinah, feeling deeply overwhelmed by the great responsibility resting upon her. She must care for three; since, in her eyes, Mira Dempster was as much of a child as the brother and sister, who had not yet outgrown bibs and aprons.

Two years before, the cottages in which dwelt those whom I have thus introduced to my readers, were so nearly alike, that a preference could hardly have been felt for either; but they now presented a striking contrast. The roof of one had been raised, giving space for airy chambers; while a piazza, French windows, blinds and paint, had

metamorphosed it into an attractive modern dwelling.

This was the home of the three children; while in the other dwelt Aunt Dinah, happy and helpful. Presiding over two kitchens, she seemed to have time and strength for all demands made upon her, while the sight of her good-natured black face was enough to dispel doubt and foreboding.

Cheerfully accepting her lot in life, she neither complained nor wished it otherwise. "The good Lord knowed all about it, when he put me here," she was accustomed to say. "He's helped me all the way through." She had shed some bitter tears over the sufferings of her first-born; but even this affliction was tempered with mercy. As his poor body grew dwarfed and deformed, his mind developed rapidly, until, as a child, Rufus was quite a prodigy of scholarship and intelligence.

Her husband dying while her children were young, she worked early and late to provide for their wants, loving them all the more because they had so few to love them.

"If they're only good, they'll go to heaven, same as white folks, and 'taint much matter about the rest."

This was her comfort, and to make sure of the desired haven was her strongest wish. Next to this she counted an education. Herself only able to read, she was very proud when told that her boys were the best scholars in school.

Rufus pored over books from morning until night. At length he felt the necessity of labor for his own support. Then came the question, "What could he do?" Few avenues were open to such as he; indeed, shoe-making seemed to be his only resource.

"If I was white I'd try for something else," he once said to his mother; "but it's of no use to fight against color."

"The Lord made you," was Aunt Dinah's only reply, and he needed no other rebuke.

He was quick to learn the details of his trade, and then a small back room was fitted up for a shop, where he worked, read, or

drew the bow, sometimes merry, and sometimes sad.

This was the singer who went in search of Olly and Charley.

"I thank you very much," said Mira, as he paused beside her. "I could have gone, but your mother thought you needed exercise. She said you had been in the shop all day, neglecting even to sing."

"True, Miss Mira, I've been pretty still to-day, but when I got up the hill I couldn't help singing. Everything looked so bright it inspired me."

"Then I am glad you went. Perhaps I might find inspiration on the hill-top. I have been in the valley all day."

"No need of that for one like you. You have everything to make you happy;" and the speaker looked down upon his own misshapen form.

"Come, Sister Mi, see what Aunt Dinah is making."

Thus called Charley, interrupting the conversation, and Mira went into the kitchen of

the brown house, where its mistress was preparing supper for two families.

"We had better go home now," she said. "Then there will be room for some one else."

"Some one else, chile," repeated Aunt Dinah, without looking up from her work. "Them children never in my way. Something's the matter with you, honey;" and she allowed her eyes to rest for a moment upon the face of the young girl. "What is it?"

"Nothing," was the reply. "I was only afraid the children would trouble you."

"Do we trouble you?" asked Olly.

"No, chile. Aunt Dinah knows better'n that. 'Pears like I'm never troubled. Just hear that boy," she said, as Rufus indulged in a hearty laugh. "Spect I said something wrong that time, else that boy wouldn't laugh so. He's mighty perticular," she added, emphasizing the first syllable of the adjective. Another laugh, and the children went out to see Rufus, who was sitting upon a bench near the kitchen window, where he could hear all that was said.

"What made you laugh?" asked Olly.

"Mother made me," was the answer.

"Children," cried Aunt Dinah, "thank the Lord you've got learnin'. 'Pears like —"

"There it comes, again," interrupted her son, good-naturedly; and presently Aunt Dinah showed her smiling face, made radiant by the consciousness that, whatever she might do, her boys could talk as well as white folks.

"Supper ready in ten minutes," she said in a loud voice.

At this call Mira Dempster went through the garden to her home, followed by brother and sister, both eager to assist in laying the table. This was quickly done, and the mosses exhibited, before Aunt Dinah made her appearance, with a plate of hot cakes which might have tempted an epicure.

"Nuff more in the oven. Ring the bell, if you want um, honey. I must tend to that boy."

The speaker was gone before a reply could be made. The children were seated at the table, and a short blessing invoked by Mira.

"I love Aunt Dinah better every day," said Charley, after acknowledging that he could eat no more.

"What makes you love her?"

"Because she's good, and makes such good things," was the honest answer.

"Is that a good reason?" asked Olly.

"I presume Aunt Dinah would consider it so," replied her sister. "She likes to have her cooking appreciated."

"Thought I'd bring more cakes," said the cook. "Hope you like um. 'Pears like that boy eat his self to death," she added, placing another plate of cakes upon the table.

"I did like them very much; but you brought us a bountiful supply at first. We need no more."

Notwithstanding this assurance, the cakes were left, with an injunction to eat every one.

Supper over, Charley thought of his afternoon experience. In relating this, the new teacher and crickets were strangely mixed; but Olly sometimes came to his assistance, so

that, between the two, their sister received a pleasant description of what was to them quite an adventure.

Mira Dempster had heard of Miss Marvin, and hoped to make her acquaintance. Having impressed Aunt Dinah favorably, it was safe to assume that she would prove intelligent and interesting; for this good woman was gifted with an intuitive knowledge of human nature, which was rarely at fault.

Miss Marvin had just opened a private school, to continue through the autumn months, and Edgar Freeman was desirous of attending, if the teacher should be one who could "see through his black skin."

This was his way of stating the matter, and, under the circumstances, it was not strange that his mother had looked closely at Miss Marvin, when she chanced to meet her in the village street.

"No trouble 'bout her. You can go," was the verdict; and Edgar had made arrangements to enter school the following Monday.

His employer made some objections to re-

leasing him, saying that the boy knew enough already; but Aunt Dinah soon silenced him. The boy had worked six months, and could afford to go to school, and as for knowing enough he was the best judge of that himself.

This boy stood six feet in his stockings, tall, straight, and muscular. A leader in all manly sports, he asserted and defended his rights with a good-humored independence which disarmed ridicule and opposition. He sometimes had bitter thoughts of the mark placed upon him, but he never allowed such thoughts to clothe themselves with words.

A day's work done, there was reward for his labor; and midnight often found him reading, oblivious of time or fatigue. This evening he was later than usual, having been detained to do an extra job. He had hardly satisfied his mother in regard to this, when he took down a slate, and began to cover it with figures, while the expression of his face showed that he was making some careful computation.

Looking up from this, after a while, he asked his mother what was Mr. Dempster's business.

"Making money, likely. That's what folks do in the city," was her evasive reply.

"Well, how does he make money?"

"Dear me! There! 'Pears like I'd better look after them children 'fore I sleep. Honey's been in trouble to-day."

"She was singing when I came along," responded Edgar, smiling at his mother's manner of expressing herself. "She don't need you now, and I want to know how her father makes his money."

"I tole you, boy, not to ask questions 'bout things that don't 'cern you," said Aunt Dinah, roused to a temporary assertion of authority. "Spect you been talking about it. 'Pears like you have;" and her voice grew hard and cold, as she clasped her hands tightly.

Rufus laid down his book, while Edgar looked steadily at his mother, debating whether it was best to yield the point, or insist upon an answer to his question.

"Mother, should you like to have me work for him?"

"Work for him!" she repeated, in an excited tone. "Work for him here?"

"No, in the city."

"Boy, what you talk 'bout? Does he want you?"

"He said something about it, when he was here the last time."

"Boy, I'd bury you, and dig the grave with my own hands, 'fore I'd let you work for Hiram Dempster. Don't say no more about it," she added.

"Then tell me what his business is. There are plenty who know. Why shouldn't I?"

"You've heard 'bout it."

"Yes, I've heard."

"Then what for you ask me?" she continued.

"Because I want to know if what I've heard is true. People say he keeps a great liquor-store, and has rooms where men drink and gamble. Is it so, mother?"

"Yes, chile, spect dat is de solum trufe," she replied, forgetting all proprieties of

speech, as she was forced to make this acknowledgment. "He never'll say nothin' more 'bout your working for him. Never!"

"Mother, does Mira know this?" now asked Rufus.

"Yes, chile. She couldn't help it. Spect you've seen her cryin', haven't you?"

"I've seen her a great many times when I thought she had been crying, and I wondered what she had to cry for."

"'Pears like we all have something. Course she loves her father, but he's a bad man, fightin' 'gainst the Lord."

This was said almost in a whisper, as though the speaker feared she might be overheard; and then there was silence for some minutes; at length Aunt Dinah took down the old family Bible.

"Edgar, you must make me a promise, 'fore we can sleep," she said.

"What promise?"

"Will you make it?" she asked, looking at him earnestly.

"I don't know," he replied.

"Dunno 'bout what your old mother asks?" she cried, laying her hand heavily upon his shoulder.

"Tell me what it is you want, mother."

"Promise never to do anything for Hiram Dempster, 'cept what you do here," she replied, slowly, never once turning her eyes from his face.

He hesitated.

"Promise!" said Rufus, in a hoarse voice.

"I will promise," said Edgar, seriously.

"Then put your hand on the Bible," responded Aunt Dinah.

He did as directed, repeating distinctly the words of a promise which placed him under most solemn obligations.

"Now, boy, shut your mouth tight, when that man's name's spoke," exclaimed his mother. "Them children's near to me, and I'll see to 'um; but Hiram Dempster better not 'trude on my premises. There'll be some talk when he comes."

"About what?" asked Edgar.

"'Bout you, boy. What you spose?"

"I hope you won't say anything about what has happened to-night. I've given you my word on the Bible, isn't that enough? All the money he has couldn't hire me to work for him now."

"I aint afraid 'bout that," answered Aunt Dinah, a little sharply. "But there's other things."

"Let them go, mother," urged Rufus. "There is no use in talking too much."

"Spect there aint, but I knows my duty."

This said, she gave him the Bible, requesting that he would read the ninety-first psalm. "I always like to hear that when I'm in trouble," she remarked. "It comforts me wonderfully."

The words of the first verse had hardly been pronounced, when Mira Dempster opened the door.

"Come in, honey," said Aunt Dinah, and without speaking, the young girl seated herself in a low rocker. Traces of tears were upon her cheeks, moving to pity those who saw them.

Rufus at once resumed his reading, and when the psalm was ended bowed his head upon the table before him, while the others knelt.

Such a prayer as followed few have heard, and fewer still have uttered. This humble woman, poor and unlettered, seemed to lay her hands upon the very mercy-seat. She asked for forgiveness of sins, strength to resist temptation, patience to endure affliction, and wisdom to guide in the path of duty.

At its close Mira Dempster rose from her knees, and passed out noiselessly as she had entered.

"That chile in trouble," said Aunt Dinah. "Spect she needs me."

"I think she does," responded Rufus. "You had better stay with her to-night."

Nothing was said, as she busied herself about the room for a few minutes; but when the door closed behind her Edgar turned to his brother, with the question, "Did you know about Mr. Dempster?"

"I wasn't sure of it, though I suspected

something wrong about him, from the first. I've heard a good deal said at different times; and I asked mother about it once."

"Of course she tried to put you off."

"More than that. She told me never to speak of it again."

"I didn't know but she would tell me so; but I was determined to find out some way. When he was here the last time, he told me he would give me three times what I could make here, if I would go to the city with him. It was quite a temptation, for I am bound to have money, if I can get it honestly."

"Then you must get it in some other way than selling liquor."

"Somebody will sell liquor, if I don't."

Rufus turned squarely to his brother as this was said. "Suppose somebody else does? The sin won't lie at your door, if you have nothing to do with it. If I was straight as you are, I wouldn't talk about selling liquor."

"Come, old fellow, don't be too hard on

me," exclaimed Edgar, in a laughing tone. "I've no idea of going into the liquor business."

"I should like to know why mother gave up making beer, when those children came here," he added soon after.

"I can tell you," replied Rufus. "Mira didn't want Olly and Charley to drink it. She said milk and cold water were all they needed."

"She was about right there, but it will be strange if Charley don't follow in his father's footsteps. I begin to see why mother is so much interested in them."

Only dimly was he beginning to see; for he knew very little of the circumstances which had made Aunt Dinah, in some measure, the guardian of Hiram Dempster's children.

II.

For greed of gain, one stoops to sin;
Unheeding that, to lose or win,
He stakes a human soul,
With all its hope, and all its fear:
Stakes all he holds most near and dear,
Beyond his love's control.

At the garden-gate Aunt Dinah paused and looked up. Above her was a cloudless sky, in which the moon shone, full and resplendent. But her eyes looked beyond this fair seeming. Piercing its azure depths, she caught a glimpse of Him who looks down with pity upon the sorrowing and tempted.

This was enough. She had gained the strength she sought. The heavy burden was lifted, and a smile lighted up her dark face. "The good Lord knows all 'bout it," she murmured; and this never-failing consolation was sufficient for her needs.

Directly after, a cheerful voice was heard,

and Mira Dempster sprang from the couch on which she was reclining.

"O Aunt Dinah, I am so glad you have come!" was her first exclamation. "I am very lonely this evening."

"I spected as much, honey; and thought ole auntie might be better'n nobody. What you been thinkin' 'bout?"

"About father and Albert."

"'Taint no use, chile, only when you pray de good Lord for um. I knows 'bout that."

"But I can't help it," replied the young girl, as she drew a footstool to the side of Aunt Dinah. "If mother had only lived."

"Don't wish her back, chile. She all done with trouble now."

"I don't wish her back; but she knew so much better than I what to do. She might save Albert and Charley."

"Spect de good Lord can save um. He's able."

"O Aunt Dinah, do you believe he will?" now asked Mira, in a tone which evinced the deepest anxiety.

"'Pears like he would," was the reply. "What's 'come of your faith, child?"

"I don't know; but ever since I received father's last letter, things have gone wrong with me. You know Albert is coming with him, and I am afraid of their influence over Charley. Albert always laughs at my scruples."

"They won't have none of their liquor here, chile," said Aunt Dinah, decidedly. "I'll take care 'bout that."

"That is not all the trouble."

"I know," was the quick response. "There'll be dirty pipes and 'bacco, all day long. I'll speak 'bout that too."

"I am afraid it will do more hurt than good," said Mira. "Albert is an inveterate smoker, and impatient of anything like restraint. He is a swearer too."

"Well, honey, we'll see 'bout that. Don't worry;" and a large, coarse hand passed caressingly over the bowed head. "'Pears like there'll be a way."

Thus Aunt Dinah endeavored to comfort

and cheer one, who, in the very spring-time of life, shrank from its burdens. Gradually her influence was felt, and despondency gave way to hope.

"You will stay here to-night," said Mira, after a short silence.

"Yes, chile, I tole them boys so. Spected you'd want me."

An hour later Aunt Dinah sat alone in the chamber allotted to her use. The children were sleeping. She had bent over each one fondly, praying — oh, so earnestly! — that they might be kept from temptation and sin.

Dinah Freeman sometimes called herself old; while perhaps in the next breath she would declare she never felt younger. But now, as she looked back over quarter of a century, the way seemed long.

Twenty-five years before she had come from the city, and engaged as servant in the family of a wealthy farmer. Her previous life had been one of hardship, as was evident from her appearance. Of her parents she

knew very little, not having seen them since she was a child.

Under these circumstances, it was not strange that her naturally warm heart responded to kindness. She became a faithful and affectionate servant, devoted to the interests of those who employed her, lavishing upon the two daughters of the family the fondest expressions of regard and using every means to add to their happiness.

At this time Hiram Dempster was a frequent visitor in the home of Mr. Gibson, and it required no great penetration to see that he was a favorite with all. A young man of good business talents, with some means at his command, he indulged in ambitious dreams of wealth. Making haste to be rich, he was not over-scrupulous in regard to ways and means. Through the representations of a professed friend he had been induced to enter a large establishment where liquors were skilfully manufactured, to be sold at a great profit. After two years, in which he proved a valuable assistant, he was

admitted to the firm, and considered himself on the high road to fortune.

Soon after, Mira Gibson became his wife, and received the congratulations of friends upon the brilliant prospect before her. Gentle and loving, her husband seemed to her all that woman could desire; and with bright anticipations she left her country home.

Dinah Manuel alone had misgivings in regard to the future. By severe lessons and bitter experience she had learned that smooth words and ready smiles are not, necessarily, proofs of a kind heart.

As I have to do with the children whom Providence had placed in his care, it is not my purpose to give a detailed account of Hiram Dempster's life. It is only necessary to say that his wife soon found she occupied but a secondary place in his affections.

He loved money, first and best; not as the miser, who would deny himself food and clothing, that he might add another dollar to

his hoard; but greed of gain was the ruling passion of this man's life. All else must be subservient.

The grossest deceptions were practised; and so they were not discovered it mattered little to him. When his wife remonstrated, she was told that women knew nothing of business, and she had better attend to what concerned her. The silence thus enjoined was never broken until the day of her death. Even when she knew that her husband was indulging too freely in the use of liquors, manufactured for others, she uttered neither entreaty nor complaint. During her visits to the old home she so carefully concealed all traces of unhappiness that only Dinah suspected the true state of affairs. Mr. and Mrs. Gibson died, believing that their daughter had married fortunately.

At their death, which occurred three years after Hiram Dempster's marriage, Dinah Manuel was strongly urged by his wife to come to her.

But Dinah had other plans. She was

looking forward to a home of her own. However, after much persuasion, and some consultation with Rufus Freeman, she consented to spend six months with one who had such strong claims upon her sympathy and affection.

The revelations of these months confirmed her distrust of Mr. Dempster. Learning enough of his business to know that it was dishonest and dishonorable, most sincerely did she pity her who was bound to his fortunes.

A child was born, during these months, but it opened its eyes upon the fair earth, only to close them ere a week had passed. The mother shed bitter tears, even while thankful that her child had gone where was no sorrow or disappointment; while the father was too much engrossed in his business either to rejoice or mourn.

"You will come again, if I need you," said Mrs. Dempster, when she parted from her favorite servant.

"If I can," was the reply. "Count on me,"

added Dinah, through her tears. "'Pears like you'll want somebody some time."

In her own home, the little brown cottage where she now dwelt, she thought often of this parting, murmuring to herself, "She'll want somebody some time."

Having no relatives in her native town, Mrs. Dempster visited there but once after her parents' death. She had no wish to look upon her childhood's home, now passed into the hands of strangers; and did so only at the urgent request of her sister. The contrast between her present and former life was too great.

She had money without stint; but to gain it her husband was bringing ruin to others. This thought haunted her, sleeping or waking; all the more terrible that she gave it no utterance. She almost envied Dinah Freeman, despite the mark upon her.

"You seem very happy," said this woman of wealth to her who counted the smallest earnings.

"Spect I am happy," was the smiling re-

ply, as she bent over a cradle which contained, for her, the dearest baby in the world.

There came a time when Mrs. Dempster needed Dinah, and so longed for her presence that a message was despatched, urging her to come at once. She could go. Her baby had grown to be a strong, healthy boy, four years of age, needing little care, and quite satisfied if allowed to roll and tumble at his own sweet will.

"'Pears like I must go right off," said Dinah, hastening to make all needful provision for those she left behind. Her husband lent his aid, and she was soon ready. He could "see to the boy," and keep the house in order.

"Pray the good Lord for me," said his wife, when about to bid him good-by; "spect I'll find trouble."

Mrs. Dempster was sick unto death. Disappointed hopes, blighted anticipations, and a crushing sense of guilt, which in some way she seemed to share, had well-nigh

done their work. She grieved to leave her child, the "Sister Mi" of our story, but, aside from this, she felt no regret at laying down a burdened life.

Dinah ministered to her wants with the utmost tenderness. Although spending little time in the sick-room, Hiram Dempster spared no expense in providing for her the best medical treatment.

At length the last day came, and he was summoned to the bedside of his dying wife.

"I have much to say to you, my husband," she whispered. "I have kept silent all these years, as you bade me; but I can do so no longer."

His heart smote him with a sudden pain, as he remembered the words she had spoken in the early days of their marriage. At that moment he would have made any sacrifice to prolong her life, — given any promise she might demand.

But the Angel of Death came suddenly, laying an icy hand upon the parted lips. One only request had she proffered.

"Let our child go to my sister, and O my husband —"

Here the voice was hushed. What more she would have said none ever knew.

The child was immediately given into the care of her aunt, while Mr. Dempster turned to his old idol, gain. He was still pressing forward in the pursuit of wealth, when one of his partners disappeared, taking a large amount of money belonging to the firm. Upon investigation it was found that his dishonesty had been great, and the shrewdest management was necessary to preserve the credit of the establishment.

This was a severe blow to the man who looked upon money as the greatest earthly good; but it only served to inspire him with new ardor. By great effort and untiring application, the past was retrieved, and again fortune smiled upon him.

His daughter was eight years of age when he contracted a second marriage with a most amiable and accomplished lady. Having seen him only under favorable circumstances,

she was ignorant of his faults, while, so far as his business was concerned, he was no worse than some of her own relatives.

Soon after this marriage, the sister of his first wife, and her husband, both died, leaving one child, a boy, who, with his own little Mira, was taken to the home of Hiram Dempster.

Here they were most affectionately welcomed by her who was to assume their care; while the father and uncle was nothing loth to receive them, since, as the guardian of Albert Wilson, he would control the property left by his parents.

His ward was a smart, active boy, somewhat impulsive, but possessing an affectionate nature, through which he could be easily managed. While he grieved for the loss of father and mother, Mrs. Dempster, by her sympathy and kindness, soon obtained a strong influence over him.

Both he and Mira were speedily reconciled to their new home, the latter loving her mother with a devotion rarely seen. They

could not have found a better friend, but, unfortunately, in Albert's case, Mr. Dempster's influence was in direct opposition to that of his wife. His example destroyed the force of her best teachings.

She remonstrated, urging the claims of duty upon him. Now that the interests of others were at stake she did not hesitate to speak plainly.

Her husband was not one to brook interference; but, for once, a woman's words had some power over him.

"I have no wish to injure the boy," he said. "Albert is doing well enough."

"No, my husband, he is not doing well enough," was the reply. "His moral sensibilities are becoming blunted, and he often quotes you as authority against me. If you would forbid his entering your store there would be one point gained. I should be glad if he would never see liquors of any kind. I would banish wine from our table if it depended upon me."

"Nonsense! you are going too far. Liq-

uors of all kinds will meet Albert at every turn in life, and he will be likely to use them."

"I hope not," replied Mrs. Dempster. "If he does, he shall not reproach me with it. I should be sorry to have him grow up like most of our young men; and lately I have been thinking that such as you, who deal largely in liquors, will find a great wrong at your door."

"People choose for themselves," was the reply of this respectable liquor merchant. "I am not responsible for others. Albert must take his chance with the rest."

Mrs. Dempster turned away, with less respect for her husband, but with her purpose nothing shaken. She would guard this boy, and save him from evil, so far as God should give her strength.

She watched over him carefully, restraining when it was possible, and striving to lead him in the right way; but as he grew older her counsels had less influence.

Mira, who was Albert's constant compan-

ion when at home, often reproved him for the use of improper language. Upon one occasion, when she had manifested more feeling than usual, he replied that Uncle Hiram used such words all the time.

"Well, they are wicked, if he does," said Mira; "but I never heard him."

"If you want to know how he talks you should go to the store," retorted Albert. "That's the place to hear him."

"It must be a dreadful wicked place then. I wish father wouldn't stay there;" and since that day Mira's opinion and wish had been often repeated. More reason was there now than then; but I will not anticipate.

Two children were born in this family, and love for them quickened the mother's regard for others. But her strength and sympathies were overtaxed. When Charley was a few months old her health began to fail.

A quiet retreat in the country was recommended, and for some reason choice was made of the village where Mr. Dempster had wooed and won his first wife. A servant

accompanied the family; but soon after their arrival it was found necessary to summon Dinah Freeman, and, as she made herself generally useful, her services were in frequent requisition.

For Mira she had retained a strong affection, which soon extended to mother and children. Olive was delighted with one who petted and caressed her so fondly; while Charley sprang to her arms gleefully.

Through all the summer months Mrs. Dempster lingered here, and then went home to die. Mindful of their children, she exacted from her husband a promise that they should be educated in the country, and it was in consequence of this promise that he had bought the cottage where they now lived.

Mira was only fourteen years of age when again deprived of a mother's care; but experience and observation had given her more knowledge of the springs of human action than is sometimes learned in a long lifetime. She had been her mother's confidant, un-

derstanding her wishes, and knowing her anxiety.

Albert was absent from home at the time of Mrs. Dempster's death; but he was not forgotten. She left a message, which Mira delivered with faltering voice, begging that it might be heeded.

"I will try to do better," said the boy, for a moment realizing his danger. "I could, if—"

He did not finish the sentence, but sprang away, leaving his cousin to imagine what it might be.

He had taken "his chance with others;" and the temptations to evil were stronger than the influences against it. In school he had the reputation of being a brilliant scholar, yet his irregularities of conduct subjected him to frequent reprimand. Only sixteen, he drank, smoked, and swore like one of twice his age. Wine was always upon his uncle's table; while in the store, different brands of liquors, with their distinguishing flavors, were the constant theme of discus-

sion. Here Albert was often complimented upon his discrimination in matters of which he should have been profoundly ignorant.

Despite all this, his guardian made no effort to stay his downward career. Mira's pleadings were of no avail, and his father's friends, living at a distance, knew little of him. Moreover, he had the ability to present so fair an exterior, when it suited his purpose, that one might be easily deceived in regard to his character. Sometimes, as he thought of the mother who had taught him to pray, his conscience smote him, and he half resolved to reform; but there was always some reason why reform was delayed.

As I have before said, his uncle made no effort to stay his course. If the boy lived five years, there would come a day of reckoning; and it might not be convenient to deal with one clear-headed and independent. So low had Hiram Dempster fallen, that the thought of rendering up a fortune, to which he had not the slightest claim, filled him

with dismay. And this was not strange. The man who deals in that which incites to the vilest crimes, degrading human nature throughout the whole wide world, will seldom act justly in any relation.

For two years after the death of his wife Mr. Dempster kept the children with him. He then bought the cottage adjoining Dinah Freeman's, fitted it up handsomely, and installed Mira as its mistress. Why he should have selected this place it would be difficult to tell, unless his daughter's wishes influenced him. She fancied the situation, while its close proximity to her old friend made it seem more desirable.

Her father was willing to provide servants, but she preferred trusting to Aunt Dinah, in whose capabilities she had the utmost confidence. Here, for a time, she seemed to have escaped all the trials of life. Her brother and sister were too young to be the source of much anxiety; while, away from her father and Albert, she thought less of their wrong doings. She received many

kind attentions from those who had known her mother; and, so far as her surroundings were concerned, she could not have been more pleasantly situated. Yet, when the first few months had passed in her country home, and she had leisure for reflection, the care and responsibility which had been thrown upon her seemed more than she could bear. For Olly she had no fears; but Charley possessed a strong will, which sometimes asserted itself unpleasantly.

Aunt Dinah was then her only comforter; and always the good woman bade her not to worry. "'Pears like 'twill all come right in the end," was her consoling assurance.

Sometimes Mira caught something of this cheerful faith, but frequently she wept and prayed in utter hopelessness.

Albert had visited her twice; but the place was not to his liking. He had lost all taste for quiet pleasures. Smoking seemed to be his only resource while here; and this so annoyed Mira that she was glad when his visits were at an end. Now, he was coming

with her father, and she shrank from seeing either.

Thus far, in compliance with his daughter's wishes, Mr. Dempster had placed no wine upon her table; and for this she was grateful. Charley's good had been considered in this, as in the request made to Aunt Dinah that she would brew no more beer.

"I know you will think me foolish," said Mira to her humble friend. "Perhaps I am unreasonable, but I am afraid to have Charley taste it; and this could hardly be avoided, if it was used in your family."

"I know all 'bout it, chile," said Aunt Dinah. "Spect my boys can drink cold water when they're dry."

Rufus was told the reason for this new order of things; but Edgar had not learned it, until the evening he insisted upon knowing Hiram Dempster's business.

As may be imagined, his brain was too active for sleep the following night. He had the clue to many things which had before seemed unaccountable; and he lay wide

awake, thinking, until daylight streamed through the low window of his room.

His mother had been as wakeful as himself. Danger threatened her, and she must, in some way, avert it. She was fertile in expedients, sometimes reaching the desired end by a circuitous route; but with her children she was frank and decided. If bitter medicine was to be taken she never sought to disguise it.

Her children were truthful and honest, regarding their word as sacred. She proposed now to bind them to a certain course of action, by a promise so strong they would not dare break it, under any circumstances. She had exacted but few promises from them during their lives; but now the occasion seemed to warrant a departure from her usual custom.

When she reached the garden gate that morning, she turned, looking back to the house she had left. It contained three children whom she loved next to her own, but she might well be pardoned if at that mo-

ment she wished Hiram Dempster had never crossed her path. "A bad man," she muttered through clenched teeth, and walked on.

Edgar soon made his appearance in the kitchen, she looking at him sharply. "Hope you slep' well, chile," she said.

"Guess I haven't slept enough to hurt me," was the reply, as he plunged his head into a basin of cold water.

"Well, chile, come home early to-night, and we'll have a talk 'bout things."

"I'll come, as soon as my work is done," replied Edgar. "I shan't feel much like stopping to play."

"Spect somethin's the matter with that boy, else he'd whistle," said Aunt Dinah, watching him as he strode away over the dew-laden grass. "Spect somethin's the matter."

It seemed to Rufus that his mother had never made so much noise about the stove as on that particular morning.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Trouble comin'," was the laconic reply.

"Well, mother, let us wait till it comes, and then do the best we can. I thought you never borrowed trouble."

"Spect I don't, chile. It's been sent."

"But you said it was coming," responded Rufus, cheerfully.

"Well, chile, I know all 'bout it, 'ready," she answered, vigorously beating some eggs. "That man's coming."

"You mean Mr. Dempster, mother?"

"Spect I do; and that boy's comin' long too."

"Well, mother, they can't hurt us."

"There, boy, can't you say nothin' else but that?" exclaimed Aunt Dinah, dropping into a chair, as though quite overcome by her feelings. "I know about that man; he wants Edgar."

"Well, mother, you have made sure of him. He is safe, after the promise he gave you last night."

"There's ways nuff to lead off a boy, and that boy knows 'em all. You'll see."

Rufus, seeing that his mother was inclined to be mysterious, wisely changed the subject; but he gained little. Aunt Dinah was meditating, and, breakfast over, her son gladly betook himself to the shop.

Mira Dempster devoted the morning hours to teaching her brother and sister. In the afternoon they went up the hill to gather mosses, and entrap crickets, Charley being in high glee at his success. On his return, he told Rufus that there was no temptation in the tin cup; so the captives arrived safely.

The day passed; its hours dragging slowly for the mother who thought and feared. Night came, and Edgar's cheery whistle was heard. Charley ran down the walk, and, reaching up his hands, was placed upon a broad shoulder, where he rode triumphantly.

"Which way?" asked the carrier, as he stood by the garden gate.

"Please let Aunt Dinah see me," answered Charley; and directly the good woman

threw up her hands in well-feigned astonishment, as the two stood before her.

Edgar sat down, with the child still perched upon his shoulder, but he soon exclaimed, "I must go home. Sister Mi is going to tell us a story, and I promised not to stop."

"I wish somebody would tell me a story," said Rufus.

"Sister Mi will tell you one," was the artless reply. "She has been making up some."

As Charley went out, Aunt Dinah seated herself in a large rocking-chair, with the air of one who has a disagreeable task to perform.

"Boys, I've been thinkin' all day —" Here she paused, as though waiting for some encouragement to proceed.

"I guess we have all been thinking," responded Edgar. "I am sure I have; and had some strange thoughts too."

"What 'bout, chile?" asked his mother.

"About a good many things."

"I thought 'bout my children all day," now said Aunt Dinah. "There's trouble comin'."

"Don't say that, mother. You are not sure of it," urged Rufus.

"What is it?" asked Edgar.

"Spect I know; and I must have 'nother promise."

"Another!" cried both the sons, in astonishment.

"Yes, boys, 'nother;" and then, in broken words, this mother, with a clearness and decision of which many fairer women would be incapable, explained her position, and their own. In doing this, it was necessary to speak of many things, in regard to which she had before kept silence; but she trusted the honor of her boys.

They had not yet been exposed to the seductions of intemperance; and, so far as Rufus was concerned, there was little cause for anxiety in the future. Edgar would soon go out into the world, to meet temptation in every form. Moreover, there was

danger that temptation would assail him within the shadow of his home.

Aunt Dinah had no reason to complain of inattentive listeners. Her subject was one of interest, and her revelations startling.

"Now, boys, I've heard 'bout a pledge folks take," she said, at length. "I don't know nothin' what 'tis, 'cept it's a promise not to touch the cursed drink."

"No danger of our doing that," replied her youngest son. "We can't even get a cup of beer."

"Well, chile, you know all 'bout that now. Spect you can promise, can't you?"

"But you haven't any pledge. Write one, and I'll sign it."

"Hear dat boy!" exclaimed Aunt Dinah, in an indignant tone, covering her face as she thought of her ignorance.

Rufus looked at his brother, as though expecting an apology.

"I am sorry, mother. I had forgotten."

This was sufficient. There was no time to linger over unimportant matters.

After some further conversation, Rufus drew up a pledge, not unlike that of the Bands of Hope. It covered the whole ground, differing only in language.

"Put in the 'bacco," said Aunt Dinah.

"No need of that," responded Edgar. "I hate the dirty stuff any way;" but his mother insisted.

"Now bless de good Lord," she exclaimed, looking at the three signatures, against one of which she had placed her mark.

III.

Father's coming: words of gladness,
To be uttered with a smile;
Yet dark days of grief and sadness
Oft they bring, with tears the while.

"FATHER'S coming," whispered Charley, as the first gray light of morning peeped into his room. "Father's coming," he repeated, in a louder tone, before Olly was roused from her slumbers.

"He won't be here till almost night," replied the sister, composing herself for another nap.

Charley crept back to his little bed, and spent the next hour in wondering what his father would bring.

Very differently was Mira occupied. She feared what her father would bring, and dreaded what he might leave. Albert, too, now a young man nearly twenty years of age, was an object of aversion. During his

last visit, he had displayed great recklessness, and the fact that he was now engaged as her father's book-keeper tended to increase her distrust of him. Yet, remembering how earnestly her mother had sought to influence and save him, she was constantly striving to devise some scheme by which this might be accomplished.

From her father she could expect nothing; indeed, various circumstances had led her to believe that Albert's ruin had been deliberately planned. This was a rather strong way of expressing what came very near the truth. Hiram Dempster had allowed the boy to ruin himself: placing temptation in his path, and giving him every facility on the downward road.

Yet he still retained some traits of the affectionate child, for whom a Christian mother had prayed. Quickly moved at the sight of distress in others, he performed many generous acts.

But he was bound to live fast. A short life and a merry one was his motto, while he

prided himself upon the coolness with which he could parry well-meant advice.

The gambling-rooms connected with Mr. Dempster's establishment had been opened soon after the country home was purchased. Ostensibly, they had been fitted up as a place of amusement for gentlemen who had a leisure hour upon their hands. In reality, they were intended to aid the process of money-making.

Mr. Dempster was a skilful gambler; and sometimes, when not otherwise occupied, indulged himself in a game. Of course, Albert followed his example.

Do you wonder that a pure young girl shrank from the presence of such men, even though they were bound to her by the ties of blood? If she had been blind to their faults, she might have welcomed them gladly; but, alas, her eyes had been opened.

A busy day followed. The house was put in order, and everything arranged for the comfort of the expected guests. Charley watched eagerly; Olly manifested some im-

patience; but Mira was schooling herself for the approaching trial.

She had never looked more lovely than on that evening. A fire had been kindled in the old-fashioned fireplace of the dining-room; and she was standing in its glow, when her father and Albert entered.

"I am very glad to see you, my daughter," said Mr. Dempster, touching his lips lightly to her forehead.

"Really, cousin, you eclipse yourself," exclaimed Albert, giving her a hearty kiss, which revealed the fact that he was no stranger to the wine-cup. "You grow handsome," he added. "Milk and cold water must agree with you."

"They do," was the quiet reply. "It might be well for you to try their effect upon yourself."

"Not this year, thank you," he answered, with a mocking bow. "Well, Charley, smoked your first cigar yet?" he asked, in the same reckless tone, turning to the child, who looked at him with wondering eyes.

"It is about time you were beginning to learn some of the manly habits."

"You will oblige me by not talking to my brother in that way," said Mira, with a great effort at self-control.

"Let him alone," added the father, somewhat sternly.

Here the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Aunt Dinah, bearing in one hand a pot of coffee, and in the other a plate of hot muffins. Mr. Dempster greeted her cordially, and Albert appeared glad to see her; but she was not inclined to talk. "Supper is ready," she said, placing herself behind Mira's chair.

Everything upon the table was complimented, the coffee receiving extravagant praise. "You might make your fortune in the city, by opening a coffee saloon," said Mr. Dempster. "This is perfect."

"Spect the cream has somethin' to do 'bout that," replied Aunt Dinah, in no gracious mood.

Supper ended, Albert looked around the

prettily furnished room, saying, with a supercilious smile, "I suppose it would hardly do to smoke here."

"It is utterly forbidden," answered Mira.

"How about the kitchen?"

"That is Aunt Dinah's domain."

"What are *you* going to do?" now asked Albert, turning to his uncle.

"Going to sit down here, and make myself comfortable," was the reply.

"Unfortunately, I must smoke," said the young gentleman, opening the hall door.

"We might go into the sitting-room," said Mira.

"I prefer remaining here," replied her father. "It seems very cheerful," he added, clasping his two youngest children in his arms. "You must excuse Albert. He complained of not feeling well, during our ride, and drank rather more wine than was good for him. He will be all right in the morning."

"I hope so," answered Mira. "I can't have him talk to Charley as he did this evening."

"You shall not be troubled in that way again. I will attend to that."

Aunt Dinah overheard this conversation, and rejoiced at Mira's courage.

Meanwhile, Albert was out of doors smoking; vexed with himself and the world in general. He was ashamed of his rudeness.

Presently Edgar Freeman came in sight. "Now for some fun," thought the lonely smoker; and, after salutations had been exchanged, he took out his cigar-case, and offered one of the fragrant rolls to his companion.

"No, thank you; this child never smokes," was the laughing reply.

"Never smoked in your life?" asked Albert.

"I tried it once, and got sick. That will answer for this child. No more such stuff for me."

"Try again. Don't give up so. One loses half the pleasure in life, if he don't know how to enjoy a good cigar. Come, take one," he added, after making this wise

assertion. "I shall be offended if you persist in refusing."

This last, uttered in a somewhat overbearing tone, was not quite to Edgar's taste, and he answered, decidedly, "I shall never smoke while I have my senses. I have something else to do."

Saying this, he strode on, leaving the young gentleman somewhat disconcerted. He had reckoned without his host, and missed the anticipated fun. "We'll see, darkey," he muttered. "There's more than one way to bring a fellow to terms."

Aunt Dinah would have shuddered, had she known what was passing in Albert Wilson's mind at that moment. But there was a good Lord over all, and a strong pledge registered.

"Sister Mi reads in the Bible every night," said Charley to his father, as the evening waned. "Don't you want to hear her?"

Now, if Hiram Dempster had expressed the true sentiments of his heart, he would have answered "No;" but with two sweet

young faces pressed close to his own he could not do this.

So Mira opened the Bible and commenced reading, when Albert came in. At first he was undecided what to do, but after a moment's hesitation seated himself in the back part of the room. The reader did not even raise her eyes; but she felt his presence, and with difficulty commanded her voice.

Reading over, Olly and Charley kissed their father good-night, and followed Mira from the room.

"Don't speak to Charley again as you did this evening," said Mr. Dempster to his nephew. "It annoys Mira, and displeases me."

"No harm done, I guess," was the half-insolent reply. "He might as well learn to smoke now as any time."

"I wish he might never learn."

Albert looked up in surprise, as this was said. "I thought you believed in smoking. This is the first time I ever heard you say anything against it. You had no objection to my learning."

Mr. Dempster winced at this last remark. It was true that he had made no such objection; but Charley was his own son, an innocent child.

"Perhaps I didn't; but you were not a baby."

"I see the difference," was the sarcastic reply. "I suppose my father loved his boy as well as you do yours. If he had lived, I might have been better. But I shall get through the world some way. Life is short, and soon over."

Saying this, Albert rose and went into the kitchen; not because he wished to see Aunt Dinah, but in his present state of mind any change was desirable.

"Well, auntie, I don't see as you grow old. A wonderful place up here for keeping young, and growing handsome."

"Spect the place good nuff," was the ready response. "Don't have no trouble here, 'less somebody brings it."

"I never have trouble anywhere. Give

me a bottle of wine, with some good cigars, and I could be happy in a desert."

"'Taint no use talkin' that to me, chile," exclaimed Aunt Dinah, resting from her work. "'Pears like you aint never happy. What your mother say to see you now?"

Albert Wilson was dumb. His cool assurance was no match for the direct remarks and questions of this woman. She had known and loved his mother.

"I wish mother had lived," he said.

"Spect it's well she didn't. You'd broke her heart."

"There's nobody's heart to break now," he answered, bitterly. "I lost my last friend when Aunt Maria died."

"What for you talk like that, chile?" asked his companion. "You've friends nuff."

"Such as they are," he added. "I know I'm a bad fellow, Aunt Dinah; but there's no help for it. I expect my pretty saint of a cousin would like to turn me out of the house; but, unfortunately, I am ticketed here for the next few days, and must stay."

Aunt Dinah was too indignant to make any reply to this; and Albert soon returned to the dining-room, where sat his guardian, moody and abstracted.

If Hiram Dempster had been in the city, he would soon have found a way to drown the troublesome reflections which oppressed him; but, bad as he was, he had too much regard for his daughter to pollute her home with the fumes of liquor. This was not the first time his ward had alluded to what he would gladly have ignored. He feared that suspicions were aroused which it would be difficult to allay.

In fifteen months Albert would be of age, and everything depended upon his condition at that time.

The next morning Aunt Dinah was early astir, doing what was necessary in her own cottage before going to that of Mr. Dempster. Here Mira met her in the kitchen.

"Dear honey, chile!" cried the good woman, folding her arms about the slight figure

of this young girl. "Ole auntie take care you. I'll see 'bout things."

Mira had borne up bravely; but these expressions of sympathy nearly overcame her fortitude. "Albert is worse than ever," she said.

"'Pears like he is," was the honest reply. "But he'll fine himself in de wrong place here. Can't smoke his nasty 'bacco in my kitchen. Ugh!" and such an expression of disgust overspread the black face as to provoke a laugh from Mira.

"Glad you can laugh, chile. Spect that's the best way."

Edgar did not tell his mother of the encounter with Albert, but Rufus had listened to a minute description of it.

"He won't give up so," was the older brother's conclusion. "Look out for him."

"This child can do that. He'll have to get up before light if he makes a fool of me."

"Don't get into a fuss with him," said Rufus. "Keep cool, and mind your own business."

"No danger but what I shall do that; and it will be well for him not to interfere. If he does, the worst is his own."

"I guess mother would think that some more promises are needed, if she should hear you talk in that way."

"Perhaps so; but between you and me, Rufe, I've made all the promises of that kind I intend to. I'll keep them and make no more. That young city chap had better mind his p's and q's. Why, I could pitch him into the middle of next week, if my temper was up."

"Better not get it up. It would only make trouble for us all, Miss Mira with the rest."

"If there's any trouble, it won't be of my making."

This did not satisfy Rufus, as his brother well knew.

"I promise not to injure a hair of his head, unless I do it in self-defence," said Edgar. "How does that suit you?"

"So far so good;" and judging best to ask no more, Rufus turned to his book. "No

lessons to learn to-night?" he asked, at length.

"I don't feel like studying," was the reply. "To tell the truth, the world looks pretty dark."

"Dark to you, with your strong, straight limbs!" exclaimed the crippled brother. "What do you think of me?"

"Think you're a jolly good fellow, and I'm a fool to mind what Albert Wilson says. I'm going to study the rest of the evening."

The next day Mira avoided her cousin as much as possible; and managed to keep Charley entirely out of his way. This annoyed him, and had it not been for the memory of other days, when they had shared the same love and care, he would have sworn revenge. For his guardian he had neither respect nor affection; but for Mira he cherished as sincere a regard as he was capable of feeling. In consideration of her happiness Charley should go unpunished for the sins of his father.

There was nothing, however, to deter him from having fun with the darkey. He had been thwarted once; but he was able to outwit the woolly head, and he would do it. As for Aunt Dinah, she was of no account, any way. So he said to himself, and so he thought; yet others entertained a different opinion.

Mr. Dempster, who wished to keep on good terms with the woman, was quite unable to comprehend her present mood. Respectful, attentive to all requests, and assiduous in serving, she received all compliments without a smile, and baffled all attempts at conversation.

Toward evening of the day after his arrival, he appeared at her kitchen-door and asked if he might enter.

"Certain," she said; and drew forward the best chair.

"I have come to pay you some money. I suppose it would be acceptable."

"Certain," she answered again, as her visitor took from his pocket-book a large

roll of bills, and counted out the sum which had been agreed upon between them, as the price of her services.

"I am afraid this is not enough," he said, pushing the money toward her. "I am willing to pay you more."

"Spect this enough," she replied, looking at it carefully. "Them children aint no trouble to me—" Here she broke down entirely, and turned away to regain composure. "I want you to let my boy 'lone," she said, at length.

"Let your boy alone! What do you mean?" asked Hiram Dempster, in a maze of surprise at her strange conduct.

"I want you to let my boy 'lone," she repeated, hurriedly, unable to say more. Soon, however, her tongue was loosed, and words flowed freely.

At first, her companion was angry, and once commanded her to stop; but she had a purpose to gain, and was not easily silenced. Her boy had promised. She wished now to save him from temptation.

"I have no wish to injure Edgar," said Mr. Dempster, changing his tactics. "He is smart and capable — "

"Spect I know that," was the impatient interruption. "He'll do well nuff if let 'lone."

After some further conversation, Aunt Dinah received the assurance she desired. "I shall never say anything more to Edgar about working for me, unless he applies to me himself," said her visitor. "In case he should apply I shall feel at liberty to do as I please."

"He'll never 'ply. Trust me for that," was the emphatic response.

Saturday, Albert Wilson could think of nothing better for amusement than a fishing excursion with the darkey. Rufus Freeman owned a boat, which lay in the river not far from his home. This, Albert proposed taking; and, after some hesitation, Edgar agreed to accompany him.

"I don't want anything to do with the fellow," he said to his brother. "But I

should like some fish for breakfast; and if the boat is going, I'd rather go with it."

Rufus fully agreed with this. Moreover, it was for the interest of all that peace should be maintained between the families. Aunt Dinah provided the lunch, and volunteered to pack it in the best possible manner. But Albert insisted upon doing this himself.

Early in the afternoon he sauntered down to the river, followed by Edgar with basket, lines, and bait. The boat was unmoored, and, with strong, steady strokes, propelled up the stream, while Albert really admired the skill of his companion. Reaching a sheltered spot, where the water was deep and dark, they threw out their lines. Fortune favored them. The fish were waiting to be caught.

"We might try our luck higher up," said Edgar. "We generally have very fine sport there."

Again he bent to the oars, making the distance of half a mile, to where dense shade above and dark waters beneath made a

favorite retreat for anglers and their prey. Here they remained until satisfied with their spoils; then, drifting down for a short distance, Edgar made the boat fast to a tree, and went on shore to look after some interests of his own. This was his hunting-ground, and it was partly to make observations that he had given himself so long a pull at the oars. He would gladly have spent the whole afternoon here; but repeated calls from Albert summoned him. As it was, he took time to explore several suspicious-looking holes, marking them so they could be easily recognized at his next visit.

Returning to the boat he found lunch temptingly displayed; and, nothing loth, addressed himself to testing the merits of cold tongue, buttered biscuits, and loaf cake.

"Now, if I had half a pint of good water or a cup of mother's coffee, I should be all right," he said, after satisfying himself in the way of eating.

"I can give you something better than either," replied Albert, with a wicked smile

upon his lips. "I brought a bottle of cider, and a glass to drink it in."

"Nice-looking cider," said Edgar, as the bottle was uncorked.

"Nice-tasting cider," remarked his companion, after draining a glass. "Try it for yourself," he added, offering the refilled glass.

"Not any for me, thank you," was the polite reply.

"You shall drink it," exclaimed Albert, with sudden vehemence. "You refused a cigar the other evening. You shan't be such a fool as to refuse this cider."

"I *have* refused it."

"No matter. You'll drink it for all that."

"No, I won't," answered Edgar, and there was no mistaking the expression of his face.

"Come, take it," said Albert, in a different tone. "There's no harm in drinking cider."

"You are sure that's cider?" remarked Edgar, unfastening the boat.

"Of course it is. What else should it be? Do you doubt my word, darkey?"

The "darkey" turned and laid a hand heavily upon the shoulder of the speaker. "Say that again, and I'll pitch you into the middle of the stream, to sink or swim, as it happens."

"Can't you take a joke?" asked Albert, his face livid with rage and fear, while his voice trembled.

"I *can* take a joke," was the gruff reply, "but I *won't* take an insult."

"Well, take a glass of cider, and let us be friends. No use in quarrelling here."

"Keep your cider with your insults. I'm going home;" and, suiting the action to the word, the boat shot down the stream like an arrow.

Albert Wilson had no choice but to submit, bearing his discomfiture as best he might. Replacing bottle and glass in the basket, he lighted a cigar.

"No use to offer one to you, I suppose," he said to his companion.

"Not the least in the world, and never will be."

Both had learned lessons that afternoon they would not soon forget; yet it is very possible, that, but for Aunt Dinah's pledge, Edgar Freeman might have tasted the sparkling champagne, and tasting it might have proved his ruin.

IV.

God cares for all; and mindful still,
Through light and shade, through good and ill,
To do his own, his high behest,
He smites or smiles, as seemeth best.

Mr. Dempster had spent nearly a week with his children, and was to leave the next morning.

There had been much to occupy his time in providing for present wants; and yet many serious reflections had intruded upon him. He thought of his own past life, of those he had laid down in the silent grave, and of the children whom God had given him. Around these last his thoughts lingered longest.

He desired for them happiness; and, dearly as he loved Charley, he would rather that he lay beside his mother than live to be such as Albert. His heart smote him as he made this acknowledgment; for Albert was what he allowed him to be.

After the conversation with Aunt Dinah, he was, for a time, half inclined to dispose of his business; but the old love of gain had not lost its power; and, moreover, he was sure all misgivings would vanish when once more surrounded with his city associates. So he made no rash resolves, but looked forward impatiently.

Another reason made him anxious to return. Albert's conduct became, every day, worse, and it was evident that he was fast throwing off all restraint.

Mira had always before tried to reason with him in regard to his course, but during this visit she found no opportunity. He was never in a mood to listen with patience, much less with profit.

"Come, cousin, suppose we have a ride," he said to her, the day before he left. "You ought not to stay here in the house moping all these beautiful days. Will you go with me?" he asked, finding she made no reply.

"I shall be too busy," she answered, with

some hesitation, not quite willing to give the true reason.

"Too busy," repeated Albert, with a sneer. "If you don't wish to go with me you can say so. Nobody will hang you for speaking the truth."

"I don't wish to go with you, Cousin Albert," said Mira, looking up to him through tear-dimmed eyes.

A flush of anger overspread his face, and he was leaving the room without another word, when she laid one hand upon his arm, and begged him to remain.

"Why should I remain?" he asked, fiercely. "I know you hate the sight of me; but I am what your father has made me. I tell you, Mira Dempster, there will come a day of reckoning for us all. I don't blame you," he added, in a softened tone; "I am not fit to come into your presence; but I am better than your father."

"O Albert! that may be," cried Mira. "My heart is almost broken when I think of the wrong there is and has been in our

family. Mother hoped I would try to save you. She loved you, Albert. Oh, for her sake, be persuaded to do differently."

"I wish I could, Mira, I hate and despise myself more than you can. But I am bound for a goal, and shall reach it soon."

"What goal?" asked his cousin, innocently.

"I had better not tell you. It might have an unpleasant effect upon your nerves," he answered, recklessly. "I am bound now for a ride, with you, or without you; which shall it be?"

"Without me. I can do you no good."

"Spect not, as Aunt Dinah says. So good-by."

From this conversation Albert Wilson went to his chamber, and, throwing himself upon the bed, groaned in very agony of spirit. Did he not despise himself? Ask any one who feels that the good in his nature has been swallowed up of evil. Ask any one of the almost innumerable host who have sold their birthright for a mess

of pottage, which might have been concocted in the witches' own caldron, so vile is it.

He knew he had committed this crowning act of all folly, and loathed himself for the deed. But so strong is habit, that another hour found him driving at a furious pace, with cigar-case and liquor-flask in his pocket.

"Going off on a frolic, all by myself," he had said to Aunt Dinah, as he passed through the gate.

"Take care, chile. I knows 'bout your frolics," was the reply. "'Pears like somethin'll happen," she added when he was quite out of hearing.

Edgar came in soon after, and said Albert Wilson had gone off with the worst horse in the village stable. "Ten chances to one but he'll break his neck; and no great loss either," was the comment.

"Stop that, chile," exclaimed Aunt Dinah, "The good Lord made him."

"And the devil has trained him," added

Edgar, in too low a tone for his mother to hear.

This boy was getting his eyes open, and was preparing to believe anything which should be reported against Hiram Dempster or his ward.

"I shall be glad when they are off the place," he said to his brother. "I shan't feel right while they are here."

"Don't trouble yourself about them," was the reply. "I am very sorry for Albert, and wish I could do him good; but he is beyond me."

"Beyond everybody decent," responded Edgar. "For my part I'd rather have a black skin than a black heart."

"I pray for him," said Rufus, a moment after. "God is able to change his heart."

"I suppose that is all true, old fellow; but I shouldn't waste much time or breath in praying for such as he."

"I wonder if you pray for yourself."

This effectually silenced Edgar, and, directly after, the attention of these brothers

was directed to a man who drove hurriedly to the cottage of Mr. Dempster.

"Your nephew is badly injured," he said as soon as the master of the house appeared.

"Injured!" repeated Mr. Dempster, in a surprised tone.

"Yes, his horse ran away, and he was thrown from the buggy. Too much liquor aboard, I guess. Any way, he's in a bad condition, and needs to be taken care of. I can carry you to him," added the messenger; and they were soon on their way to the house, where Albert lay in nearly a senseless state.

"He will need a physician," remarked Mr. Dempster.

"I called on Dr. Waring, as I came along," was the reply. "He will be there as soon as we are."

A sad sight presented itself when they reached their destination. Blood was oozing from several cuts about the head and face of Albert Wilson. His clothes were

covered with mud; and his whole appearance was repulsive in the extreme.

Dr. Waring had just arrived, and was making as thorough an examination as circumstances would permit. One leg was broken, and the whole body bruised.

"He will need long and careful nursing," said the physician, addressing Mr. Dempster. "I suppose you will wish to have him carried to your house, and it must be done at once."

Of course he must be carried to the cottage; and orders were given to that effect. The best arrangements possible were made, under Dr. Waring's directions, while a messenger was sent forward that everything might be in readiness.

Aunt Dinah seemed to have expected something of the kind; and, nothing disconcerted, applied herself to the task before her.

"Spect there'll be a hard pull, honey. But de good Lord knows," she said. "Trust old auntie."

For these and like comforting remarks she found time; but they in no way interfered with her preparations for receiving the injured boy. With the assistance of Rufus and Edgar, the parlor was soon transformed into a most comfortable and inviting room for an invalid.

Slowly, very slowly, the litter was carried, new relays of men taking up the burden when others were fatigued. Silently they entered the house with him, who had, so short a time before, gone forth in health and strength.

Mira and the children went to Aunt Dinah's cottage, so they might neither see nor hear what transpired. More than an hour had elapsed, when Edgar came to say that the fracture was reduced, wounds all dressed, and Dr. Waring about to take his leave.

"Is your mother there?" asked Mira.

"Yes; and going to sit up to-night."

"Will Albert get well?" was the next question.

"I don't know about that," replied Edgar. "I heard the doctor say his habits were against him. His head and face are terribly cut up."

Albert Wilson had been thrown upon a heap of stones; hence the numerous cuts which disfigured the lower part of his face, and now, dressed with straps of plaster, gave him so hideous an appearance.

"It will be a hard case to pull him through," said Dr. Waring to Aunt Dinah. "If it was your boy, he'd come out good as new; but this fellow has lived too fast. He'll learn a lesson now. Not a drop of stimulant will he get while under my care."

The next day Mr. Dempster walked about the house and grounds the impersonation of unrest. It was impossible for him to remain quiet. This awkward accident, as he characterized it in his own mind, might be attended with troublesome results. As yet, no one could be certain of the issue.

But one thing was sure. Albert Wilson would never go out of that house the same

that he had been. Weeks, and it might be months, of suffering and enforced abstinence would produce a positive effect upon him. If he should die! Even then, some one would demand his property; so, turn which way he would, there was neither rest nor comfort for this wicked man. His whole life had been one of evil; and his whole course had involved others in ruin.

He longed to get away, and in active exertion forget the accusing thoughts which haunted him; but a decent regard for public opinion compelled him to remain where he was, until there should be some change in the condition of his ward.

Aunt Dinah's hands and heart were full; but she wished for no assistance more than her boys could give. Edgar remained with Albert while she was engaged in household duties; and she managed these so that he could still attend school.

Mr. Dempster, having neither the tact nor disposition necessary to a good nurse, rarely proffered his services. The fourth day after

the sad accident he received a letter summoning him to the city. There was no reason why he should not go; at least Aunt Dinah said so; and he was willing to abide by her decision.

It must be confessed that his absence was a great relief to those he left behind. Dinah Freeman was tired of that "walkin' ghost," and Mira constantly feared that her father would do something to weaken her influence over Charley. Albert was in a most critical condition. He raved in delirium; sometimes uttering horrid oaths, and sometimes begging his mother to lay her hand upon his head.

Now commanding, now soothing, his untiring nurse held her post through long, long hours. "Life or death with him now," said the doctor, and she redoubled her care, bathing the burning brow, and moistening the parched lips.

At length, the fever was spent; and then followed weakness and prostration, which seemed the harbingers of death. But a vigorous constitution, which dissipation had not

wholly ruined, carried the sufferer safely through.

It was a bright day for all, when Dr. Waring made this announcement, and expressed the belief that his patient would in a few weeks be able to move about the house.

"You must have patience," he said to Albert. "You are doing well now, thanks to Aunt Dinah; and if you obey orders you will soon be on your feet again."

"What is the matter with my head?" asked the young man, for the first time seeming to realize that something was wrong.

"It's been shaved, chile," was the reply of his nurse.

"We thought you could do without much hair, while lying here," added the doctor.

This satisfied him for the time, or rather, what may be nearer the truth, he was too weak to make further inquiries.

He had but confused ideas of the accident which had placed him in this helpless condition. He knew the horse had grown restive, and excited his temper. After this was a

dull sense of pain and confinement. His head, for which he had vainly endeavored to find a comfortable position, seemed of twice its usual size, while a raging fever tormented him. Gradually he learned the whole truth.

"I had a jolly frolic," he said to Aunt Dinah, in a mocking tone. "What made you try to patch me up? I am of no use in the world."

"Spect de good Lord knows," was the serious reply. "He'll call you to 'count, some time. 'Pears like you've had warnin'."

"I should think I had. Pretty serious one too; and if there was anything good left in me I should heed it."

His companion looked at him earnestly, to see if this was said in derision. "You mean that, chile?" she asked.

"Yes, I do mean it; but I don't suppose it would be possible to find anything good about me."

"Spect de Lord knows 'bout that. If you'd ask him, he'd make you all good."

"I ask him!" repeated Albert. "Why, Aunt Dinah, you forget that you are talking to a reprobate."

"I don't know nothin' what that means, but spect it's somethin' bad. I know I'se talkin' to a sinner, just such as de good Saviour died for."

"Mother used to talk to me about the Saviour," said the invalid, musingly. "So did Aunt Maria, till I refused to hear her."

"'Twould been better, chile, to minded 'em. 'Pears like you might."

"I might; but I wouldn't. The fault was my own, and I must take the consequences. I shall get to be a baby, if I lie here much longer," he added, after a short silence, during which Aunt Dinah raised her heart in prayer that this wayward boy might be reclaimed.

The flush upon his face warned her that he had already said too much, and she forbade further conversation. An unusual tenderness in her voice betrayed the emotion she

sought to conceal, and Albert looked up, wondering if any foolish word of his had given her pain.

"Don't mind what I say," he half-whispered. "I'm not worth a single tear; but I thank you for your kindness."

Poor Aunt Dinah bent over him at this, replying, in a scarcely audible tone, "'Pears like your mother sees you now, chile."

"My mother!" he murmured, tears stealing down his cheeks.

"There, chile, don't talk no more," now said his nurse, in the same tone she would have used in soothing an infant. "We'll see 'bout things when you get well. Jes' sleep now;" and she put to his lips a draught which would induce slumber.

While he slept, Aunt Dinah stole out to report to Mira the strange words she had heard. "Keep prayin', honey," she said. "Spect de good Lord hears; and 'pears like he'll do. Been dark good while, honey; but when darkness all roun', den look out for de mornin'."

"O Aunt Dinah, do you believe Albert will give up his bad habits?"

"Yes, honey, I believe it," answered the good woman, decidedly. "I believe it," she repeated, clasping her hands, and looking reverently upward.

"I hope he will; but it seems almost too much to believe," responded Mira, not yet having attained to the faith of her companion. "If he goes back into father's store —"

"Spect he won't do that," interrupted Aunt Dinah. "Better jes keep him sick."

"But that would be wrong. You wouldn't do that."

"Dunno, chile. Can't have him back in that bad place."

The entrance of Edgar interrupted this conversation. He had come to take his mother's place in the sick-room; but she was not disposed to trust his attendance at that time. Mira offered him a chair, and, nothing loth, he sat down. He was still in school, progressing rapidly with his studies, and enthusiastic in his praises of Miss Mar-

vin. In his estimation she knew all that was necessary to be known; and, if he could but reach her standard, he would be the happiest fellow alive, black or white.

"There's a talk about Miss Marvin staying through the winter," said Edgar. "If she does, I shall go to school if there's money enough to keep soul and body together in the old cottage."

"There will be no lack of money," replied Mira, with animation. "I can assure you of that. Your mother will be well paid for her services this autumn, so far as money goes; but, even then, we shall be in her debt. I hope you realize what a blessing it is to have such a mother."

"I know she is a good mother," was the reply. "I used to think she held the reins rather tight, and pulled up too often; but I see now that she was right. I might have got under too much headway and gone straight to perdition."

"Your mother hopes Albert will be saved," remarked Mira, her thoughts reverting to

him who had been the object of so much solicitation.

Edgar looked at her wonderingly, knowing that she could not have reference to the recovery of health. She was aware of his surprise at being thus addressed; but she had done it with a purpose. Having often feared that her cousin would influence Edgar Freeman to evil, she had more than once resolved to throw the weight of her own personal influence against him. Now that it appeared probable they would be much together during the next few weeks or months, this seemed an imperative duty. In reply to the inquiring look of her companion, she said, "I mean that your mother hopes he will reform his habits, and become a good man. We all know that he has been very different from what he should be."

"He likes what he calls a jolly time," responded Edgar.

"Jolly is a favorite word with him; but I can see nothing jolly in smoking and drinking. Perhaps you see with different eyes

from mine. I believe men and women think differently about such things. They always have in our family," she added, with a sigh.

Her companion was considering whether it was proper for him to express his opinion frankly upon this subject, when she asked a direct question.

"Has Albert ever offered you cigars or wine?"

"Yes, Miss Mira; but he never will offer them to me again."

"I wish you would tell me about it," she said. "I believe it would kill me, if evil should come to you through connection with our family. I have thought of it so much that I couldn't help speaking."

"There isn't any danger. Mother looked out for that," he replied, in a choking voice; moved that one like Mira Dempster should manifest so much interest in his welfare.

"Seems to me your mother looks out for everything. But how did she manage this?"

"We all signed the pledge," answered

Edgar, smiling at his companion's puzzled look.

"What pledge?" she asked.

"Aunt Dinah's pledge; strong and square. Not a loophole to dodge out, and no end to it either. Rufus wrote it, but mother gave the orders."

"I wish I could see it," exclaimed Mira.

"I haven't seen it since the night we signed. It's among mother's treasures somewhere."

"I don't think I quite understand it yet," said Mira. "I wish you would tell me what made her think of having a pledge."

Thus urged, Edgar gave a short description of the evening's events, when his mother, with a decision at once grand and conclusive, placed the obligations of a solemn pledge between him and ruin.

"I shall never have any more anxiety about you," said the listener, as, in her happiness, she extended a small white hand to grasp one black and labor-hardened. Presently, Aunt Dinah appeared and told

her son he could go about his lessons. "That boy fast 'sleep and don't need nobody," she said.

So home went Edgar; but not to study. He was in no mood for that. How strong he felt! How sure that he should never bring disgrace upon himself!

At length he addressed his brother. "Come, old fellow, why don't you say something? Forgot everything but that book? 'Pears like you might speak to me, as mother says."

"Edgar!" exclaimed Rufus, in a tone of reproach.

"Well, I meant no harm. Mother's just as good as anybody; and I think enough of her. You needn't look like that."

The older brother was about to resume his reading, when the children came in.

"We wanted to come," said Charley, "and Sister Mi said we might, if we wouldn't be —"

"Troublesome," added Olly, coming to his assistance.

"Come here, and let's see how troublesome you are," responded Edgar.

The child sprang into his extended arms, and then there followed a frolic, in which both joined with hearty good nature, while Olly amused herself with an illustrated paper.

"Sister Mi went into the parlor," she whispered to Rufus, after having exhausted the pictures. "Aunt Dinah said Cousin Albert wanted to see her."

Mira's visits to Albert during his sickness had been short and infrequent. This was the first time he had asked to see her; and it was with some trepidation that she walked to the bed on which he lay.

"Will you shake hands with me?" he asked.

"Certainly," she replied; "and I am very glad to see you better."

"Are you really glad?" he asked, retaining her hand. "I don't see how you can be."

"I am really very glad," she answered, making an effort to speak cheerfully, as

Aunt Dinah had desired. "We have been very anxious about you."

"I didn't deserve it," was the reply. "Perhaps I shouldn't have been hurt if you had gone with me that afternoon; but I'm glad you refused to go."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because you are too good to be with such as I. I've thought about it a good deal within a few days; thinking, when I seemed to be sleeping."

"You are getting too tired," said Mira, as he paused, evidently much fatigued. "Don't talk any more."

"It will tire me more *not* to talk," he replied, quickly. "If I live, I should like to do differently from what I have done; but perhaps there is no use in trying."

"Oh, yes, there is!" exclaimed his cousin. "If you would only try, we should all be so happy;" and, forgetting that he ought not to be excited, she added, "Do promise to try."

"I will promise one thing, Mira. I will

never do anything to injure Charley. If he learns to smoke and drink, it shall not be through my influence. I've wanted to tell you, so you needn't feel anxious about that any longer."

"Oh, thank you for the promise. I know you will keep it. I couldn't help feeling anxious," she added. "You know mother left him in my charge; and it would be terrible if he should go wrong."

"More terrible than you know," responded Albert. "Death is better than ruin."

Mira knew this conversation ought not to be carried further, and begged her cousin to defer whatever he might wish to say until he should be stronger. "Aunt Dinah said you must not talk. She will never let me come again if she finds you are worse after this visit."

"Aunt Dinah is a wonderful good nurse, but I suppose she don't know everything," he said.

"Spected jes how 'twould be," exclaimed this wonderful good nurse, opening the door

softly. "Knew you'd both talk; and I can't have it no more. Come, honey, this boy mus' sleep."

"I am sorry," answered Mira, in a deprecating tone. "I told Albert he ought not to talk."

"No harm done," whispered the invalid. "I have relieved one conscience, and gladdened one heart; so there is something gained."

"Well, chile, I'm glad of that; but don't you speak 'nother word now. Honey, you go right out."

"Yes," replied Mira. "Good-night, Cousin Albert. I will come to see you again in the morning, if you would like to have me."

"I *shall* like to see you; but give me a good-night kiss now, just as you used to when we were children."

She bent over him, their lips met, and she then left the room, happier than she had been for many long months.

It was yet early in the evening; but dark-

ness reigned without, while within the fire-light cast shadows on the wall. The children not having returned, Mira Dempster sat down alone, to reflect upon the conditions of her life. A mother dead; a father engaged in the business which her very soul loathed; a cousin, whom she had loved as a brother, reckless and dissipated; two others, as yet too young to doubt or fear, entrusted to her guidance, — was not the thought of all this enough to sadden one older and braver than she?

Yet hers was not so sad a lot as that of many cursed by the self-same demon. Poverty had not laid its grasp upon her. She raised her hands imploringly to Heaven, and prayed that this cup, this bitter cup of agony, might be taken from her lips. God had the power to do this. With him all things are possible; and she allowed herself to hope that brighter days were in store for her and hers.

"Albert must have changed, or he would never talk as he had that evening." She

thought of it for a long time, and repeated this to herself, again and again, until her face grew radiant with a new hope.

"You look happy, chile," said Aunt Dinah, as she entered the room half an hour after.

"I am very happy," was the reply. "I do believe better days are coming for us;" and then she repeated some things which Albert had said to her.

It may seem strange that this young and beautiful girl should thus give her entire confidence to an uneducated black woman. But it is true, as those who have had occasion to test friendship well know, that money and intellectual development have less to do with the heart than many suppose.

Aunt Dinah's whole affections were lavished upon her two boys and this family of Hiram Dempster. She would as soon have betrayed her own interests as theirs.

"Keep prayin', honey," was the reiterated advice. "'Pears like we'll have the blessin' yet. It's comin'."

"I do believe it," responded Mira, "and I am so thankful."

"Well, chile, so's your ole auntie. Spect we'll live to see de mornin'."

"I must see to those children," said the sister, mindful of her duties; "they are never ready to leave your kitchen."

"Hope not, chile. 'Pears like they mos' b'long to me. But I'll send 'em 'long;" and out into the darkness went Aunt Dinah, her heart full of praise and thanksgiving.

"We have stayed too long," exclaimed Olly, when she heard a familiar step upon the gravel walk. "Come, Charley, we must go," she added, turning to her brother.

"And I will carry you both," said Edgar.

"I don't think you can, I am so tall," replied Olly, drawing herself up to her full height just as the door opened.

Nevertheless, he could and did, depositing the two safely at their sister's side. Then a lamp was lighted, the Bible read, and prayers repeated.

What a contrast was this to the home

Hiram Dempster would himself have made for these children, who prayed, while he cursed!

There must have been some subtle connection between their minds and his that evening. Their faces, eloquent with dumb reproach, looked up to him from the cards he held in his hand. He grasped the wine-cup, but the same sweet faces were mirrored in its depths.

Yet he continued to curse, while they prayed.

V.

The blow fell, swift and sure,
With strong convulsive shock,
When gushed the waters, pure,
From out the flinty rock.

Miss Marvin had taken tea with Mira Dempster, and the two young ladies found the time pass delightfully. The children were in a state of rather uproarious mirth over a new game, and Aunt Dinah's face was radiant with happiness.

The teacher had praised her boy and her cooking. Edgar was a fine scholar, and her muffins were inimitable. Moreover, she had received a call, in her own kitchen; which, swept and garnished for the occasion, was sufficiently attractive to be the object of some complimentary remarks.

Miss Marvin could see through a black skin; indeed, it seemed in no way to obstruct her vision; and having a fancy for

studying character, she lost no opportunity to improve her acquaintance with Aunt Dinah. This good woman's friendship was easily won; so that Edgar had a new incentive to diligence in his mother's oft-reiterated command to "do jes right, and not trouble nobody."

As usual, he went to the post-office in the evening, returning with letters for Mira and Albert. These remained unopened until the guest had taken her leave, and the children were in bed. Even then Mira was in no haste to decipher the somewhat obscure writing of her father. She was expecting to see him soon, and this letter would probably give the date of his coming. As for that directed to Albert, she could only guess at its contents.

"Well, honey, you've 'joyed yourself this time, I know," said Aunt Dinah, coming into the room with a tray of dishes.

"I have enjoyed the afternoon very much," replied Mira; "but here is a letter from father," she added, in a tone which showed

how little welcome was the missive. "I have hardly courage to open it."

"Spect it can't hurt you, chile," responded Aunt Dinah. "'Pears like I'd read it right off and see."

Mira acted upon this advice, and found that her father might be expected the next evening. "I wish he wouldn't come," she murmured. "I wish he wouldn't come."

"What is it, honey?" asked Aunt Dinah, opening the door from the kitchen. "Thought you called."

"I didn't call. But come in. I have no one else to tell, and we must do something."

"What, chile? Spect ole auntie ready for most anything."

"Father is coming to-morrow."

"Well," replied the woman, endeavoring to speak in an indifferent tone, — "well."

"I am afraid it will be anything but well for Albert. I am almost sure father will bring him wine, and then there will be an end to all hope."

At this moment Albert's bell was heard,

and Aunt Dinah obeyed the call. "Something strange has happened to me," he said, as soon as she opened the door.

"What, chile?" she asked.

"I have seen my mother."

"Seen your mother!" exclaimed Aunt Dinah, throwing up her hands.

"I suppose I dreamed," rejoined Albert. "But it seemed as though mother sat here beside me. I saw her, and felt her hand upon my forehead. It was so soft and cool, it took away all the pain. I wish it wasn't a dream. I want my mother, my own dear mother! Aunt Dinah, do you suppose mother knows anything about me, now she is in heaven?"

"'Pears like she does," was the reply. "Spect she couldn't forget you. You was her baby."

"I wish I had died then. I might be in heaven with her now. My own dear mother!" he sobbed again.

"Wouldn't you like to see your cousin, chile?" asked Aunt Dinah, rather distrusting

her own ability to say what was proper. "She 'members all 'bout your mother."

"I wish she would come," he answered, quickly. "Ask her, please, and tell her —" But the door closed before he had completed this sentence.

No sooner was he left, than his evil genius whispered, "You are a fool! You will be sorry for this to-morrow." He felt the pressure of his mother's hand, and, for once, the good in him conquered.

"Aunt Dinah says you want me," said Mira, shortly after.

"I do want you," was the reply. "Please put your hand on my forehead, just as I dreamed that mother did."

The small, delicate hand was laid upon his aching brow, while he told her of his dream.

"Do you suppose mother could come here?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied; "but I sometimes feel that my mother is near me. When I am in great trouble she seems to comfort me."

"Poor Mira! you have had so much trouble," said Albert, in a pitying tone. "Enough, without any addition from me. But I have added a great deal. I am sorry for it now."

"That repays for all," she answered, wishing in some way to assure and comfort him.

"No," he replied, sadly. "Sorrow can never repay for any wrong; but if I could do better."

"You could; and then we should all be so happy. O Cousin Albert, I am so burdened with sorrow! Do help me!" exclaimed Mira. "Help me, and God will bless you."

"What can such as I do?" was the question, asked in reply. "If I could help you, I would."

"Give up drinking," she at length found voice to say, trembling lest she might rouse the old spirit of reckless independence.

"I would, if it were not for your father. At any rate, I would try."

"Try now," pleaded his cousin. "Oh, promise that you will try."

"My promise would be worth nothing when I am once more in the way of temptation."

"Then take a solemn oath," continued Mira. "You certainly wouldn't break that."

"I don't know. This thirst for strong drink is a very demon; and when it has the mastery, my oath would be no more than an idle word."

"Then I know of but one way to bind you safely," said his cousin, in a tone which was intended to be playful.

"Do you know of *one?*" he asked, eagerly.

"I think I do."

"What is it?"

"You must sign Aunt Dinah's pledge."

"Aunt Dinah's pledge?" he repeated. "Tell me about it."

She looked at him for a moment. His face alternately flushed and paled with emotion, while he was fast reaching that state

of excitement which his physician would have pronounced most injurious.

But there were other considerations, which outweighed all thought of present health, or comfort. He was in a mood to be influenced for good. Now, if ever, must the decisive step be taken. To-morrow another might stand between them; and Mira Dempster resolved to test her power, and bide the consequences.

She told him what she knew of Aunt Dinah's pledge, and the circumstances under which it was written.

He listened eagerly, understanding now wherein lay Edgar's strength to resist temptation.

"Aunt Dinah was wise," he said. "Did you know your father wanted Edgar in the store?"

"No," answered Mira, with a shudder. "He never shall go there, if I can help it."

"I don't think there is any danger," responded her cousin. "Your father has

given up all idea of it. But the boy would have been a wonderful hand there. I wish I could see that pledge," he added, after a short silence. "Please ask Aunt Dinah to let me see it."

You can imagine Aunt Dinah's surprise, when told of Albert's wish. "Pledge, chile!" she exclaimed, her eyes dilating with wonder; "what pledge you mean?"

This question rather startled Mira, who was not quite sure that even present circumstances would reconcile Aunt Dinah to having her family secrets betrayed.

"Didn't you and your boys sign a pledge?" asked the young girl, coming close to her companion.

"Who tole you, chile?"

"Edgar told me, auntie. Don't blame him," added Mira, anxious to dispel the gathering frown. "I was afraid father or Albert would influence him to do wrong; so I talked with him, and he told me about the pledge."

"Bless you, honey!" cried Aunt Dinah.

"'Pears like you think 'bout everybody. I mus' save my own childern, you know."

"I am so glad you thought of that way," was the reply to these somewhat confused remarks of the mother. "Will you let Albert see the pledge? Perhaps he will sign it."

"Think he would, honey?"

"It is possible. I hope he will. You know father is coming to-morrow. It may be too late to do anything then."

"I'll bring dat pledge in 'bout a minute," responded Aunt Dinah, rushing from the room.

"Will she let me see it?" asked Albert Wilson, directly after, when his cousin again stood beside him.

"She has gone for it," was the reply; and "in 'bout a minute" the good woman appeared.

"Here 'tis, honey," she said, extending a small roll of paper, carefully tied with a bit of scarlet ribbon.

"Please sit down, auntie, and tell us how

you happened to have such a paper as that," said Albert. "Please tell us," he added, coaxingly, as she sat looking at him in silence. "There must be some reason for it."

"Spect there is, chile; but you aint fit to hear nothin' 'bout it to-night. Ought to be sleep 'fore now."

As nurse, she felt constrained to say this; while she had other objections to giving Albert Wilson a history of her pledge. Yet she allowed herself to be persuaded, and, passing lightly as possible over all which might seem like censure of others, explained her motives.

"I understand it all now," responded the invalid, when she had ceased speaking. "You were afraid of me; and you had reason. I did my best, or my worst, whichever you may call it, to make Edgar smoke and drink; told him a lie too; but he was too sharp for me. Read the pledge, Cousin Mira."

She complied. "No swearing, smoking, or drinking," he said, by way of comment,

and then relapsed into silence. "That's a great deal to promise. I should forget, and swear fifty times a day, I am so used to it. Perhaps I could manage the rest, but that would be impossible." Thus he murmured at intervals, talking to himself rather than others.

How blessed it is that voiceless prayer reaches Him to whom it is addressed, and the suffering heart may, unseen by mortals, hold communion with its God!

Aunt Dinah and Mira Dempster prayed, while Albert Wilson counted the cost, and calculated the chances of his reform.

His life for the last few years, and the associations of that life, were all against him. His guardian could not be overlooked, and he alone knew what influences this bad man would bring to bear upon him. To sign the pledge was virtually to sever all connection between them, save that imposed by law.

Her cousin was so long silent, that Mira, wondering if he had fallen asleep, laid one hand lightly upon his, when the quick, warm

grasp assured her that slumber had bound none of his senses. Still not a word from his lips, and not a motion of his body, save when an attempt was made to withdraw the imprisoned hand.

Thus half an hour might have passed, indeed it seemed much longer to those who waited and prayed, when Albert asked that the pledge might be given to him.

"I want to read it myself," he added. "Place the table and lamp by the bed, where I can see."

In unrolling the pledge, he was obliged to relinquish Mira's hand. "Don't leave me," he said, as she turned away. "I shall grow weak, if you do. I am going to risk everything upon one throw. If I win, my life will be redeemed; if not, the sooner it is over, the better."

There was a gleam of the old recklessness in his eyes as he closed this sentence; but directly it gave place to a dewy softness.

"I must have pen and ink."

"I will bring them," replied Mira; but he retained her, with an entreaty that she would not leave him.

"I need you," he said. "Kiss me, as my mother used to, and let me feel that some one cares for me."

The kiss was given, and Aunt Dinah brought pen and ink. Mira traced her name in delicate lines. Underneath this, in strong, bold letters, appeared the signature of Albert Wilson, underscored to give it emphasis.

"Now, bless de good Lord," cried Aunt Dinah, falling upon her knees; and kneeling there, in seeming unconsciousness of her companions, she poured forth the gratitude of her heart. Staying then neither to listen nor speak, grasping the precious roll, she left the cousins to their own communings.

"I am so glad, so thankful!" said Mira. "I am sure you will do right now."

"I shall try," replied Albert. "But, oh, such a life as I have to undo! I shall need Aunt Dinah's prayers and yours too. You

do pray, don't you?" he added, looking at her wistfully.

"Yes, your mother taught me to pray, and I have never neglected it."

"She taught me too; but I have despised all her teachings. I wonder if I could repeat the little prayer we used to say together?"

"Try," urged his cousin; and he did try, uttering slowly each word, until he reached the closing amen.

"I thought I had forgotten it," he added, in a whisper.

A light tap on the door announced Aunt Dinah's return. "Sorry to 'sturb you, children," she said. "But there's been talkin' nuff for to-night. Spect there's 'nother day comin', and I mus' see 'bout this boy's sleepin'."

It was quite time, although he declared he was wide-awake, and feeling well, only a little tired.

"Ole auntie knows 'bout that," was the reply of his nurse, as she removed the lamp to the farthest corner of the room. She

then gave the pillows a vigorous shaking, and prepared a sleeping potion, which she held to his lips.

As Mira had glided from the room, and Aunt Dinah refused to speak or listen, Albert, forced to silence, soon yielded to the soothing influences by which he was surrounded, and slept soundly.

Later, there was another assumption of authority, for Mira Dempster could not think of sleeping after so eventful an evening. "Let me sit up and think it all over," she said. "It seems to me I was never so happy in my life."

"Done thinkin' nuff, for once," replied her companion. "'Pears like you can be happy 'nother day. Mus' go to bed, honey, chile;" and this shrewd woman commenced a recital of all which must be done the following day. "Mus' sleep some 'fore that," she said, in conclusion.

Mira could be persuaded to disrobe and lay her head upon the pillow; but sleep came neither at her bidding, nor that of

another. Toward morning she slumbered lightly, only to be roused by the first low call of her brother.

It was a busy day for hands and hearts. There was cooking to be done in Aunt Dinah's best style; for Hiram Dempster should never complain of the food placed before him in his country home. Then a general "cl'arin' up," which, although greatly enjoyed by its prime mover, required quite an outlay of time and strength.

In the midst of all this, Albert's wants were not neglected, more attention even than usual being bestowed upon him. He needed sympathy; for the contents of his guardian's letter had ruffled his spirits, and made him wish that he was no longer an invalid, dependent upon the care of others.

Once he would have expressed his annoyance without reserve; but he was now making an effort at self-control. Moreover, his newly awakened regard for his cousin moved him to silence. He would not add a feather's weight to her burden. He spoke of her

father's expected visit, as though having no relation to himself; but Mira could not allow the day to pass without giving expression to her fears.

"I am afraid father will tempt you," she said, in a constrained voice, which betrayed the effort it cost her to speak of him.

"I *know* he will," was the reply. "I have thought it all over; and can imagine just what he will say. But I believe I am proof against his wiles."

"I hope and pray you may be," responded Mira, while the hot tears coursed down her cheeks.

Mr. Dempster arrived and received a hearty welcome from his younger children. He listened eagerly to the report of Albert's improving health, and manifested unusual interest in all which was told him, yet he was ill at ease.

Aunt Dinah saw this, and accounted for it in her own way. "That bad man," she muttered to herself. "Fightin' 'gainst the Lord, and his 'struction's sure."

He made but a short visit to Albert's room before supper; but after this inviting meal had been eaten and praised, he excused himself from the children, upon the plea that he must have a long talk with their cousin.

He had brought with him a box of tropical fruits and delicacies, calculated to tempt the appetite of an invalid; but Aunt Dinah positively forbade any being carried to her patient that evening.

Mr. Dempster yielded to her authority; at the same time taking occasion to say that he had some bottles of choice wine, which he thought might be acceptable to one in Albert's condition.

"I suppose you believe in wine as a medicine," he remarked to the sable nurse.

"Spect I do, sometimes; and sometimes spect I don't," was the evasive reply.

"How about it in this case?" he asked, with a slightly confused look.

"That boy don't 'long to me."

"I hope you'll not ask Albert to drink any wine," said Mira. "He is doing well,

and the doctor says he must take nothing stimulating."

"Country physicians are not expected to know everything. I consulted a friend of mine, and he advised different treatment."

That was a falsehood; but this man was accustomed to telling falsehoods, and could do so without a blush. Afraid that Albert's fortune would slip through his fingers after all, he had decided upon his course of action, and would allow no scruples or pleadings to interfere with him.

"How soon do you expect to come back to us?" he asked of his ward.

"Not at present," was the answer. "I shall be in no haste to leave such comfortable quarters."

"I thought you would be impatient at such long confinement."

"I am sometimes; but when I get able to walk, it will be very different."

"Your old friends will be sorry to hear that you intend staying here longer than is necessary," said Mr. Dempster. "They

inquire for you very often, and wish to see you back. This is a very good place to be sick in; but you used to think it stupid enough when you were well."

"I have changed my mind," replied Albert, quietly. "It is a very good place for thinking. At any rate, I have done considerable thinking since my head cleared up."

"I am glad you are satisfied," responded his guardian. "I suppose it will be best for you to remain here a while longer; but I shall want you in the store as soon as you are able to attend to business. I don't find any one who fills your place."

Albert was not yet ready to announce his determination never to return to the store; he kept silence, hoping his uncle would see fit to leave him. Not so, however.

"By the way, I thought you might like some of our old Port; so I brought a few bottles," said this man, who would lure another to destruction.

There was no answer to this; and he pro-

ceeded; "I filled a box with the best of everything I could find in the eating line, and took it along with me. You must be tired of sick rations by this time."

"Aunt Dinah looks out for that," replied Albert, with more animation than he had before manifested. "She is a wonderful cook."

"I know that; but she can't manufacture such things as I have brought. You must try some of them in the morning, washing them down with a glass of old Port. Live well, and we shall soon have you on your legs again."

It is always difficult to sustain a conversation in which only one of the parties is interested, and this fact was becoming every moment more apparent to Hiram Dempster. He really wished for a long talk with his ward, and had flattered himself that he possessed the ability and material to make such a talk acceptable; but he was completely foiled.

Albert's indifference, either real or feigned,

made it impossible for him to say what he desired. After making several ineffectual attempts, he was glad to retreat under cover of a professed fear that he might weary his companion.

Albert Wilson was sorely tempted to break the first condition of his pledge, when the door closed behind this man, whom he now despised more heartily than ever. His head was clear, and his thoughts exceedingly busy, and he was now thoroughly convinced of some things he had before only suspected.

Longing for the presence of some friend, the sight of Aunt Dinah's black face was never more welcome, than when she came in to see if anything was wanted.

"I want some fresh air," was the reply, "That man consumed all there was in the room."

"What you mean, chile?" asked the good woman, with so much surprise as to provoke a hearty laugh from the "chile."

"I mean just what I say," he answered,

"There has been company in here, and now I want some fresh air."

"I don't smell nothin', chile," said Aunt Dinah; and at this Albert fairly shouted.

"Make fun of old auntie, will you?" she added, with a puzzled look. "'Pears like you might do better than that."

"Let me laugh, auntie; I have done little enough of it lately. But I wish you would open a window. The air seems close to me."

Aunt Dinah complied with this request, and then busied herself about the room, all the time wishing she knew what had passed between Hiram Dempster and his ward.

"Have you seen the inside of that box, uncle told me about?" asked Albert.

"Yes, chile, I has done that; and there's nuff nice things to make folks' mouth water. I can't tell half."

"How about the wine?"

"Dunno nothin 'bout that," she replied, sharply, and then added, in the same breath, "Don't touch it, chile!"

"Of course I shan't; I should break my pledge if I did, and I suppose you would punish me in some way."

"Dunno 'bout that, chile. Spect you don't b'long to me to punish."

Albert could talk fast enough now; and seemed in danger of talking quite too much, when a peremptory command silenced him. "No more talkin'. Shan't speak 'nother word to you."

"Don't be 'fraid, honey. That boy all right." So much, Aunt Dinah found opportunity to whisper in Mira Dempster's ear, accompanying this with a characteristic gesture, which implied that the matter was settled beyond all doubt.

A new fear then took possession of the young girl's heart. She dreaded a rupture between her father and her cousin. Both were high-tempered, and although she believed that Albert had been wronged, she yet wished the day of reckoning might be delayed.

She was not alone in wishing for this

delay. Hiram Dempster was greatly troubled by his nephew's strange conduct, and spent most of the night in a vain effort to solve the mystery. Without suspecting the whole truth, it occurred to him, that, under the severe discipline of suffering, Albert might have formed some resolutions of amendment.

"He'll forget them when once he tastes of wine," muttered his guardian. "I'll have him back in the store as soon as possible."

Why was it that at this moment a thought of his own boy, whom he loved and petted, intruded upon him? What would become of Charley should he die?

Well would it have been had he pursued this train of reflections, allowing them to produce their legitimate effect.

But he would not. There was wine in the house, and he drank sufficient to induce temporary forgetfulness.

VI.

"God will help you." Doubly strong
Are they who trust his power;
Might and grace with him belong,
To bless the darkest hour.

A GLORIOUS morning; the air clear, cool, and exhilarating.

Mira Dempster stood by the door of her cottage home, half forgetting the difficulties which beset her way, as she looked upon the landscape outspread before her.

God has set his seal of loveliness upon this fair earth; and thrice blessed are they who have eyes that they may see. This young girl saw; and, seeing, her heart glowed with a sudden transport of joy. But suddenly the vision paled as her father stood beside her, and she was again groping in darkness.

This man was in no mood for appreciating beauty or purity. His thoughts were busied

with a scheme so base, that even he contemplated it with some misgivings.

Meanwhile, the quick, impatient ringing of a bell summoned Aunt Dinah to her patient.

"That boy no business callin' now," she muttered, somewhat annoyed at being interrupted in her preparations for breakfast. However, she made all possible haste to obey the call, quite recovering her equanimity before reaching the parlor.

"The top of the morning to you, auntie," was the greeting she received.

"Good mornin', chile," she replied. "'Pears like somethin's the matter with you."

"There is," he answered, laughing. "I've found a bright idea in my head, and wish you to have the benefit of it."

"Well, chile;" and here the good woman's heart gave an ominous beat, so fearful was she that that this boy would, in his present humor, declare that signing the pledge was only a farce.

"I am going to get up, dress myself, and

behave like a well person. It is my opinion that I have lain here long enough."

"What the doctor say, boy? Wait till he come."

"But I can't wait," was the reply. "I wouldn't lie here another day for a hundred dollars. I must sit up."

"Can't have no such work," replied the careful nurse. "Spect I'll be blamed for nothin', if you does get up."

"No, auntie, you shan't be blamed; I'll take all the blame on my own shoulders; but get up I must and will. I am expecting a visit from my guardian, and must be in readiness to receive him."

"Well, chile, breakfast's waitin'; I'll see 'bout you, bime-by;" and back she went to the kitchen.

Nothing was wanting in the arrangement of the breakfast, but it failed to tempt the appetites of those for whom it was prepared. Even the children ate less than usual.

Ordinarily, Aunt Dinah would have considered this positive proof that her cooking

was not appreciated; but Albert now so engrossed her attention that she hardly noticed what passed at the table.

"Mus' see 'bout that boy," she said to Mira, as soon as breakfast was over; and he was desirous of her presence, as the bell gave notice.

"I've been waiting with all the patience I could muster, auntie. Now, I want you to make a good fire, open the windows, and bring me a clean suit throughout. Don't stop to make objections," he added.

"Well, chile," she answered, a little impatiently, at the same time complying with his wishes.

"Oh, this is glorious!" he exclaimed, as he inhaled the bracing air. "I shall be strong enough for anything in five minutes."

Now that the matter was really settled, Aunt Dinah entered heartily into the work of assisting her patient to appear like "well folks." A neatly arranged room, with no traces of disorder, first appeared. Then the young man himself was carefully dressed, and seated in a luxurious arm-chair.

"Now I feel like myself," he said. "I am ready for company, and can look any man in the face."

"Spect you want some breakfast now, chile," responded his nurse.

"I think I should like some," he replied. "Be sure you give me a cup of good, strong coffee. I need the best you can make."

"Don't be afraid. Ole aunty knows 'bout that. Shan't nobody come till you's ready;" and, casting another glance around the room, she went out.

"How is your patient this morning?" asked Mr. Dempster, as she passed him on her way to the kitchen.

"Better," was the laconic reply.

"I was just thinking of making him a call, but it may be too early."

"Spect he'd better have breakfast."

"What is the matter with Aunt Dinah?" now asked Mr. Dempster of his daughter. "She seems determined not to talk. Is she dissatisfied with working so hard?"

"I have no reason to think she is," re-

plied Mira. "She never complains; but she has been very anxious about Albert, and must be very tired."

"Of course she is," remarked the father, without feeling that this in any way accounted for her unsocial mood.

Truth to tell, he stood more in awe of Dinah Freeman than of any other human being. Rendering a full equivalent for all she received, she was in no way dependent upon him. While she neither feared nor respected him, she did not hesitate to censure him strongly, whenever occasion seemed to demand it.

This morning, things seemed to her in a strangely confused state, and for once distrusting her ability to improve them she wisely kept silence. Albert ate his breakfast with a hearty relish, praising it extravagantly; yet even this failed to elicit what he considered a proper response from Aunt Dinah.

"I am to have a reception this morning, and first I wish to see my cousins," he said,

after eating and drinking all which had been set before him.

"Honey, chile, that boy wants you. He's goin to have a 'ception this mornin'."

Any one not accustomed to Aunt Dinah would have considered this message most amusing; but Mira thought only of its import.

She was happy to see her cousin looking once more like himself. His hair was yet short, but so thick that the deficiency in length was scarcely noticed. The scars upon his face were partially concealed by a soft, silky beard, and there was little to remind one of the terrible accident which had so nearly cost him his life.

"Your father has brought some wine, this time," he said to his cousin.

"Yes, I heard him say that he had," she replied. "But, oh, I entreat you not to taste it."

"There is no need of your doing that; I trust my pledge is sufficient; and I believe I am strong enough to resist any temptation.

But God only knows. I hope your father won't bring wine into this room. It seems to me he would prefer that I should go on in the old way."

Mira covered her face with her hands. She had been forced to the same conclusion, terrible as it was; and now, perhaps within the next hour, the final struggle would take place. If Albert conquered, he might be counted safe for all time; but if his guardian, by persuasion, or otherwise, could induce him to taste of wine his destruction was sure.

There were three who realized this: Mr. Dempster, his daughter, and his ward. Most unhappy was the position of this young girl, compelled to oppose her father's influence, yet ever fearing the result.

Now that his better nature was in the ascendant, Albert felt for her a tender sympathy. "Pardon me for speaking in that way of your father," he said, kindly. "My provocation has been very great, but I ought not to trouble you."

"I know you have had great provoca-

tion," she replied, sorrowfully. "I have tried to do right, but it sometimes seems to me that we are all doomed. I tremble for Charley."

"Not all doomed, cousin," responded Albert, looking at her tenderly. "You are in no danger, and if I live I will help you train Charley, so that he may be spared the bitter experience I have known. You see I am getting solemn," he added, making an effort to speak lightly, and hoping thus to turn the current of Mira's thoughts.

But his own were tending in the same direction, as his next remark proved. "When I woke this morning I was in jubilant spirits. It seemed to me I could withstand the world, and do what I know to be right. But just thinking of that wine has given me a desire for it. God help me, for I am very weak!"

"He will help you, if you try to do right. But my father! What will become of him? He is coming, I must go," she exclaimed, as the hall door opened.

Albert drew her face to his, and kissed her. The next moment Hiram Dempster entered, bringing a bottle of wine and glasses, which he placed upon the table.

"Really, Albert, this is a surprise," he said. "Aunt Dinah told me you were not to sit up for three days longer."

"Aunt Dinah is usually supposed to know whereof she affirms," replied the young man. "But I rebelled, and hence her mistake. I have an idea of setting up for myself, generally. I am nearly of age, and can anticipate a little, in case of emergency."

"You must be setting up for yourself in good earnest, if you have refused to obey Aunt Dinah," responded his guardian. "She is a positive character."

"She is quite a remarkable character in her way. I have learned to know and appreciate her, during the last few weeks; and I honestly believe I should have died but for her."

"Possibly. We must see that she is well repaid for her trouble."

Mr. Dempster looked at his daughter, as though expecting she would leave the room; but she was not inclined to do so.

"I brought in this wine, thinking you might like a glass," he remarked to Albert. "Mira is very temperate, but perhaps she will drink this morning to your improved health."

Albert Wilson's face grew livid with anger. Another passion, too, assailed him. It was no easy thing to sit there, with the wine-bottle by his side, and yet refuse to taste of its contents. A terrible thirst seemed consuming him as the wicked eyes of his uncle rested upon him. Twice he opened his lips, and essayed to speak; but not until the glasses were filled did he utter a single word.

"Take that wine away," he then exclaimed, hoarsely. "Take it away."

"Why? What is the matter with you?" asked Hiram Dempster, in a tone of affected surprise. "I didn't know that you ever refused good wine. This is some of

the very best; no sham about it;" and he moved a glass nearer to his nephew.

The fumes of the wine appealed to his senses, nearly maddening him; and for a moment he seemed to hesitate. His tempter saw it. Mira saw it, too, and placed one hand lightly upon his head.

"You have saved me," he cried, clasping her hand with warmth. "Take the wine away."

"Shall I carry it out?" asked Mira, turning to her father.

"No," he answered, angrily. "Take yourself out, and leave me to manage my own affairs."

Never before had her father spoken to her in such a tone, and without a word of remonstrance she left the room.

"Trust me. All the powers of darkness couldn't compel me to taste of that wine now," said Albert, as she was closing the door.

These two men, thus left alone, sat confronting each other with steady gaze, until

Hiram Dempster, convinced that he was playing a losing game, changed his tactics.

"I never dreamed of getting up such a scene as this, when I packed some of our choicest old Port. I thought it was just what you needed, and for all that has happened I haven't changed my mind. It would do you good, and I don't understand your scruples about drinking it."

Albert Wilson set his teeth firmly, struggling for composure. The man before him had quite recovered from his ebullition of temper, and was now cool, wary, and determined.

"You know what I have been," at length said Albert, — "a reckless, dissipated fellow."

"You call yourself hard names," interrupted his guardian, with an insinuating smile. "You have led a jolly life; but young men must sow some wild oats, and I expect you will make one of our most substantial merchants yet."

"I hope I may," replied Albert. "I have sowed plenty of wild oats, and for the last five weeks have been reaping the harvest. It has proved a very unprofitable investment, and I believe I have done with that kind of farming."

"I am not sure that I quite understand you," remarked Mr. Dempster, coolly. "If you mean that you have been a little too fast, in some things, I am ready to agree with you, and shall approve any resolutions of amendment you may see fit to make. As your guardian I have never attempted a rigid control of your actions. You have chosen for yourself." Here the speaker paused, sipping leisurely of the sparkling wine.

Had Albert Wilson yielded to the promptings of his excited feelings, he would have hurled bottle and glasses at the head of his guardian; but this would have defeated his own ends.

"I *have* made some resolutions of amendment," he said, with a great effort at self-

control. "From this time, God helping me, I will neither swear, smoke, nor drink."

"That's going it strong," was the mocking response. "You must calculate upon being quite a saint, if you stick to your resolutions."

Thus far, in the interview, Hiram Dempster had confined himself to gentlemanly manners, and methods of speech. He was now getting a little beyond them, and presently his voice was heard in loud, angry tones.

Albert was then master of the situation, and improved his advantage to state definitely what were his intentions. He would not return to the store, or in any way help to carry on the business of liquor-selling. "I have done with gambling too," he said; "done with it forever."

"What do you propose to do for the next year?" asked his guardian.

"I am not decided in regard to that," was the reply. "I am old enough to think of some permanent business."

"There will be a good opening in our firm when Lucas retires, but it's of no use to say anything about that till you get over some of your extra nice notions."

"It will *never* be of any use. My money must be invested in something besides liquor."

Mr. Dempster winced at this; and again filled his glass with wine, taking care to pour it as deliberately as possible.

This, of course, was done with a purpose. He understood the torture he was inflicting, and counted on it as a powerful aid in his nefarious scheme. If Albert would but touch his lips to the wine, all would be over.

But he would not; and by a movement which might have seemed to a casual observer purely accidental, the contents of both glasses were spilled.

"Really, I beg your pardon," said Mr. Dempster, as his companion manifested some annoyance at the drops upon his hands, which he instantly removed.

Involuntarily, he was about to pass the handkerchief across his heated brow, when he remembered himself, and dropped it upon the floor. Touching the bell at the same moment, he summoned Aunt Dinah.

"Uncle has made your presence necessary," he said, pointing to the table, as she entered the room. "I will thank you for a clean handkerchief. This is saturated with wine, and unfit for use. Please take it away."

Dinah Freeman looked inquiringly at the men before her, wondering what would be the result of this interview; and half inclined to assert her authority as nurse. She made no reply, however, but hastened to remove the table.

"Very awkward in me to make you so much trouble," said Mr. Dempster, annoyed at the turn affairs were taking.

Still no reply. The woman thus addressed left the room in silence.

"If you have anything further to say to me this morning I shall be glad to hear it,"

remarked Albert Wilson. "I am getting tired."

"You have excited yourself for nothing," replied his guardian, with a sneer. "One would think I had been tempting you to some terrible crime."

At this moment Aunt Dinah returned, and proceeded to do what was required of her, Hiram Dempster wishing, all the time, he could in some way neutralize the influence she had over his ward.

"I am very tired," at length said the young man.

"Spect you be, chile. Talked nuff this mornin'. Mus' rest now."

"I want to rest," he replied, throwing back his head like a tired child.

Dr. Waring's voice was now heard, and directly he opened the door. A series of discomfitures awaited the master of the house this morning; but there was no retreat.

"How is this?" exclaimed the doctor, without stopping for customary salutations.

"My orders have been disobeyed. Who is responsible?"

"I suppose I am," responded Albert. "I insisted upon getting up."

"A great mistake in you, and one I didn't expect. We've had a hard time to get you where you are. Been stimulating, too, I see," he added, angrily, glancing at the wine bottle and glasses. "Worse and worse! I hoped better things of you."

"I've had nothing more stimulating than a cup of Aunt Dinah's coffee this morning," was the reply. "That wine belongs to my uncle, and is here for his own pleasure."

This put a new aspect upon the matter, and the physician instantly addressed himself to Mr. Dempster. "Excuse me," he said. "The sight of my patient in a state of rebellion put all other thoughts out of my head. It's risky business for him to get up in this way, and I must insist upon the most perfect quiet."

"I hope I have done him no injury," replied the gentleman, with some confusion.

"I thought a glass of wine might be of service to him."

"A great mistake. A *very* great mistake, allow me to say. It was never less needed by any one. I have given especial orders in regard to that, and while he is under my care they must be obeyed."

How Aunt Dinah blessed him for those words, mentally thanking the good Lord for having put them into his heart!

Mr. Dempster acquiesced with ready politeness, professing the utmost solicitude for the health of his nephew.

"Perhaps I had better take myself and the offending wine out of the room," he remarked, with affected pleasantry; and, no objection being made, he could but act upon his own suggestion.

Albert drew a long sigh of relief, as his guardian closed the door, exclaiming, in the next breath, "Do, auntie, give me a cup of coffee, I am so thirsty."

"Dunno 'bout that, chile."

"Let him have the coffee if he wishes it."

Dr. Waring had undertaken the care of Albert Wilson with very little interest, aside from its bearing upon his own professional reputation, but the young man had now a strong hold upon his sympathy. Unprincipled and reckless as he had been, the good in his nature was not yet wholly destroyed.

But few words were exchanged during Aunt Dinah's absence, she being careful that this absence should be short; yet enough was told to convince the doctor that his patient had been subjected to a severe temptation.

"You are right," he said. "If you yield, there's no telling where you'll bring up next. Leave wine and every other liquor to those who have cooler heads than yours."

"The best coffee I ever tasted," said Albert, when he had drained the last drop from the cup. "A drink fit for the gods, and for which mortals can never be sufficiently grateful."

"Enthusiastic!" replied the doctor, while Aunt Dinah's face was lighted up with a smile of intense satisfaction.

"Set up long nuff for once, chile," she said.

"Yes," answered the invalid. "I am ready to lie down; but it has done me good to be up; I felt more like a man."

While this was going on in the sick-room, Mr. Dempster paced the garden-walks, carrying Charley in his arms, occasionally answering the child's questions in a way which showed that his mind was preoccupied. He had make a miserable failure of all he attempted that morning. His ward was further removed from him than ever before. His daughter was grieved and indignant, while his own soul was more deeply stained with guilt, — and all for nothing.

If he had succeeded in his purpose with Albert, he fancied he would have been better satisfied; and yet this was not certain. Charley's soft cheek rested against his own, stirring all the father within him. The words he had heard rang again in his ears: "I suppose my father loved his boy as well as you do yours." Just as well. Perhaps bet-

ter. He remembered Mr. Wilson's love for Albert, and clasped his own boy more closely. Olly came toward them with a troubled look. "Sister Mi is crying," she said. "I asked her what was the matter, and she wouldn't tell me."

"Let me go," exclaimed Charley, struggling to free himself from his father's arms. "I must take care of Sister Mi;" and away ran the child, hardly pausing to take breath, until he found his sister in her chamber. Essaying all childish ways to comfort her, his own tears mingled with hers, when these proved unavailing.

Soon Olly came back, and then two children begged to know why Sister Mi wept; but her grief was too deep for their sympathy to fathom. She persuaded them to leave her, promising to meet them in the dining-room, and hear their lessons, somewhat earlier than usual.

She went down the stairs, just as Dr. Waring stepped into the hall, and Albert hearing her, asked that she would come to him.

"Just a mimute," he said to Aunt Dinah, who objected to any more talking.

"Come in, honey;" and the speaker passed out, that her presence might not interrupt the confidence of these cousins.

"Don't mind what your father said," half whispered Albert. "He was angry, or he never would have spoken as he did. The trouble was all on my account. I am going to help you now, and you shall see what a good brother I can be," he added, with a smile, striving to divert her thoughts.

"Did you drink the wine?" she asked.

"No, Cousin Mi, I didn't; but it was a hard place for one like me. I was very angry, and that helped me. The speech which hurt you benefited me; so we can offset, and let it go for nothing."

Mira could hardly find words to express her gratitude; yet enough had been said, when she was reminded that "that boy mus' rest."

Aunt Dinah was in the best of spirits; and, as a natural consequence, made extra

preparations for dinner. So much was done that Charley asked who was coming.

Albert slept, his uncle making no effort to see him again, until nearly time for their early tea. He had then quite recovered his usual manner, and conversed upon indifferent subjects, making no allusion to the events of the morning.

What became of the pure Old Port no one but its owner knew. It disappeared, and this was such cause for rejoicing that no questions were asked. The other contents of the box were eaten with a keen relish, Aunt Dinah and her boys receiving their full share.

Mr. Dempster seemed desirous of being on good terms with all; and, however he may have felt, exerted himself to banish unpleasant memories. To Mira he was more than usually kind; praising her excellent management of the children, and offering her unlimited indulgence in everything which money could procure.

Olly and Charley thought their father had

never been so nice; but Dinah Freeman shook her head ominously. "Somethin's brewin'," she muttered. "'Taint nothin' good neither."

Thus matters stood while Mr. Dempster remained; and, contrary to what might have been expected, he made no further effort to lure his ward back to old habits. "I shall expect to see you as soon as you are able to work again," he said, on the morning of his departure, quite ignoring the determination which had been previously expressed by the young man.

"Guess he didn't make out much this time," said Edgar, with a flourish of long arms, when this man had really gone.

"Albert Wilson was all right last evening; straight as a line, and bound to keep so. I tell you what 'tis, Rufe, mother beats the crowd for training boys in the way they should go.

"She has had some practice," quietly remarked the elder brother. "Besides, she knows where to go for help."

"Yes, I know all about that. The good Lord helps her, as she says; but 'tis my opinion that she does something herself. When she says the word it's time to start."

Hiram Dempster was thinking much the same thing as he rode along with his hat pulled over his eyes to shut out the view of what was passing around him. "A remarkable woman, determined to have her own way; but true as steel, and to be trusted in any emergency."

There was no gainsaying this; and, although angry at her interference with some of his plans, he could not but acknowledge that she was in the right. Then he fell to wondering wherein lay her power, and whence she had gained such wisdom.

Directly came to his mind those words which Mira had read in his hearing, the evening before: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

VII.

While oft we grope in blindness,
Doubting, from day to day,
God's hand, outstretched in kindness,
Leads us the destined way.

AUNT DINAH was preparing a company dinner. She had hardly looked into her own kitchen since leaving it early in the morning, and everybody in the family knew that an unusual amount of marketing had been done the day before.

"There, honey, chile, I've done my best," said the cook, when the last dish was taken from the fire. "I couldn't do no better for the President."

It was with mingled feelings of pleasure and sadness that Albert Wilson, who had been so long confined as an invalid, seated himself at the luxuriously spread table. Since he sat there last he had suffered what few can suffer and live. Defiant then, his

motto "A short life and a merry one," he had well-nigh solved the mystery of death, and paid the penalty of his sins.

It seemed strange to his young cousins that he did not join more heartily in their expressions of delight, and Charley looked at him in astonishment when a tear trembled in his eye and sobs choked his utterance.

"You see what you have done, auntie, — made a real baby of me," said Albert, at length. "I knew you were spoiling me, all the time. It will take more than a year for me to get over it."

"Hope so, chile," was the laconic reply. When remembering that this dinner had been gotten up in honor of his first appearance at the table, the young man addressed himself to the substantial viands before him.

It is needless to repeat the praises bestowed upon this dinner. It is sufficient to say that the cook was made happy, and considered her labor well repaid.

After dinner Charley was silent, seeming to have some subject of importance under

consideration. At length he gave a clue to what this might be, by asking his sister if she should allow Albert to smoke in the dining-room.

"I am not going to smoke at all," responded his cousin.

"I thought you always did after you get up from the table," said the child, innocently.

"I always used to, but I have given up smoking now."

"Why?"

"Lots of reasons, that I'll tell you when you are older."

"I guess I know now. Sister Mi told you not to. She says it's bad and makes all the house smell so;" and this last remark was rendered peculiarly emphatic by the expressive countenance of the speaker. "Why don't ladies smoke?" he asked, directly.

"Some of them do," answered Albert.

"I never saw any. Sister Mi don't; and Miss Marvin don't; and Aunt Dinah don't."

"Spect they don't," exclaimed the last-

named individual. "Ketch me havin' that nasty 'bacco roun'. I hate it."

"Cousin Mi will say amen to that," responded Albert, "and I hope I shall sometime be able to join you."

"Can't you now, chile?"

"Not exactly. 'The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.' I wish I had never seen a cigar. Smoking makes way for drinking."

"Yes, chile; one bad practice always follows 'nother."

Mira, mindful of the boys in the other cottage, moved from the table, thus interrupting the conversation.

"We will finish this subject some other time," said Albert. "I have thought a good deal about it during the last few days. In fact, I have been compelled to do so. Tobacco is a very tyrant, when once it gets the mastery, as I have learned to my sorrow. We must never let Charley taste it."

"Why, you said—"

"I said a great many foolish things," interrupted the young man. "You must for-

get them just as fast as you can, and remember what I say now. You must never swear, or smoke, or drink anything stronger then tea and coffee. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," answered Charley, looking earnestly in his cousin's face. "Sister Mi says that, and she knows all the good."

"And I know all the bad. More's the pity."

"Sister Mi can tell you how to be good," replied the child, reaching up his arms. The next moment he was raised from the floor, while a proud head bowed upon his shoulder, to conceal the fast-falling tears. Charley caught a glimpse of those tears, and wondered why Cousin Albert felt so bad now he was all well.

It was not quite sure to the young man's mind that he was all well. His moral nature had been so deeply diseased it could not be expected to recover a healthy tone at once. He could keep guard over his lips, but his thoughts seemed often beyond his

control. As he was now situated, his only temptations to evil came from within. How would it be when he should once more go out into the world?

During the afternoon an incident occurred which illustrated Aunt Dinah's hatred of tobacco, and caused no little merriment among those who witnessed it. She was at work in the kitchen, when a man came to the door to make some inquiries. He was smoking, and, not thinking it worth while to waste politeness on a black woman, replaced his pipe in his mouth, after asking a question. This was all which could be borne, and when a whiff of smoke was blown directly in her face, the door was shut with a characteristic "Ugh!"

The man stood for a moment, as though expecting the door would be again opened, but, disappointed in this, he rapped loudly.

"You'll put away that nasty pipe 'fore I talk to you," exclaimed Aunt Dinah, holding the door so nearly closed that only her eyes and mouth could be seen.

"Whew! That's the trouble, is it? 'Taint many women-folks make such a fuss as that;" and the smoker held his pipe behind him. "Guess you don't like tobacco," he said, when ready to take his leave.

"Spect I don't. I've seen nuff that dirty stuff."

This opened the way for quite a discussion in regard to the use of this vile weed, which so many roll as a sweet morsel under their tongues.

"Can't tell nothin' why men will use that stuff," said Dinah Freeman, when her kitchen was invaded by four "childern," all eager to hear what she would say in regard to her late visitor.

"I'm sure I can't tell," responded Albert. "It has always seemed strange to me, whenever I stopped to think of it."

"Wish 'twould make every one sick nuff to most die."

"It does, when they first begin to use it; but that makes no difference. I was so sick, that I thought for a while I should be

obliged to give up trying to smoke. As for chewing, I had no taste that way. It is too filthy."

"Ugh! I should think so, chile. 'Pears like I'd be sick all the time."

"O Aunt Dinah, such a face as you make up!" cried Charley.

"You taste 'bacco, chile, and see what a face you make up," was the reply. "My boys don't have none 'roun', and my ole man didn't neither."

"If all the women were of your mind, auntie, the tobacco crop wouldn't pay for harvesting," said Albert. "And if that was out of the way, there would be less liquor drank than there is now."

"Spect there would, boy. 'Bacco makes 'em dry all time. Don't nothin' taste right. Dirty creeturs, spittin' 'roun', and spectin' somebody'll jes run 'roun' after 'em, with a mop. Honey, chile, don't never marry none of them 'bacco-chewers," she added, turning to Mira.

Fastidious gentleman may consider this a

somewhat coarse description; but to those who listened it seemed not a whit overstated. Indeed, Albert Wilson was so impressed with its truthfulness that he clapped his hands, and shouted bravo at the top of his voice.

Then, the advice given to Mira. Think of such a rose-bud mouth pressed by lips discolored with tobacco! Love is said to be all powerful, but it cannot always render the senses oblivious.

"There, childern, spect you've laughed nuff now, and that boy's getting too tired," said Aunt Dinah, when the tumult of laughter had somewhat subsided. "Mus' go right off now, else you'll have 'nother sick spell."

"I am ready to go," was the reply. "I have had a good dinner, and a good lecture. Cousin Mi, don't forget auntie's advice," he added, looking back, with a quizzical smile.

"No danger she will, boy. I knows 'bout that."

Soon there was quiet in the kitchen, while

a table in the dining-room was spread with brilliant-hued and feathery mosses.

The days were short, reminding one of coming winter, and in anticipation of this Olly had collected a large store of such treasures as nature's snowy mantle would then conceal. In arranging these, even Charley could give assistance, so carefully did he clip away the coarse and faded parts. Olly had permission to try her skill in making a bouquet for Miss Marvin; and as each tiny bit was held up for Sister Mi's opinion, tongues moved as rapidly as fingers.

"A happy family," thought Rufus Freeman, who opened the door in answer to a call from Charley.

"I have been watching you in the garden, and hoped you would visit us," said Mira. "There is the arm-chair waiting to be occupied."

"I didn't think of coming in when I left the shop," was the reply. "But mother beckoned to me from the window; so I obeyed."

"I am afraid you have found yourself neglected to-day. Your mother has been very busy."

"Oh, no, Miss Mira; I have been well cared for. Mother never neglects her lame boy;" and, as he said this, he laid aside his crutches, and, drawing the arm-chair a little nearer to the table, seated himself.

"I've been wishing to try my hand at this business when I could find leisure; but your success discourages me. I have no heart to attempt what must prove a failure."

"That is not right," answered Mira. "I have never known you to fail in what you attempted. You have a good eye for the disposal of colors, and could easily eclipse me. Suppose you make your first attempt this afternoon."

A few words, thus spoken in kindness, transformed the world to this unfortunate one. Unfortunate, — and yet many, honored of men, and counted far above their fellows, possessed not half the noble gifts which characterized black Rufus.

For a little while he forgot all which separated him from others, and gave free expression to his thoughts. His clear discrimination, combined with great delicacy of taste, made him a choice companion to those who could understand and appreciate him. The children were charmed by his odd remarks and queer fancies. It was just like hearing stories all the time.

So much occupied were they all, that Edgar's whistle was first to remind them of the approach of night. Rufus took up his crutches, apologizing for having stopped so long.

"I've been glad every minute you stayed," exclaimed Charley. "Don't go yet," he added. "I want to hear some more."

"We all wish to hear more," said Mira, looking up from the mosses. "You have woven some of your fancies into beautiful forms. That bouquet eclipses mine; but you might enlarge it to advantage. Come again to-morrow."

"I must make up for lost time then. I was tired of work to-day."

Rufus Freeman thought he spoke truly in saying this; but he was more tired of thinking than of work. He needed to remember that the "good Lord" had made him. In some way this truth had come home to him with new power that afternoon; and he went home rejoicing that One who was far wiser than himself had appointed his lot in life.

Aunt Dinah wondered that she heard nothing from Albert but this was explained by the fact that he had been sleeping.

"I've had a queer dream," he said, laughing. "I've been in the land of tobacco. Everything smelled of tobacco, tasted of tobacco, and its broad leaf was the only green thing to be seen. Smokers and chewers thought themselves in paradise for a little while; but they soon grew tired of it. The worst trouble seemed to be that there was no such thing known as sweeping or house-cleaning."

"Wan't there no women, there, chile?" asked Aunt Dinah.

"Only a few, and they were as bad as the men. Everything was steeped in tobacco; and you may be sure I was glad enough to find myself in a clean room when I awoke. Twenty-four hours in that country would satisfy any one."

"Wish the 'bacco men was all there, by 'emselves. 'Pears like 'twas a vision, chile," said Aunt Dinah, as she went out to prepare food for the dreamer.

It might have been well had a vision been vouchsafed to Hiram Dempster at this time. He was never before so perplexed and troubled. The fortune he had coveted seemed to elude his grasp; clerks proved unfaithful; he met with losses at the gaming-table, and he was sometimes tempted to give up business while sure of a moderate competence.

If all he had invested in the liquor traffic belonged to himself he need not fear; but a large part of this must be paid over to Albert

Wilson, unless some way of escape could be found.

Under the spur of excited feelings he wrote to his ward, desiring his presence in the city at the earliest possible moment. As might have been expected, this elicited a reply which augured ill for the young man's submission in future. He preferred the quiet of a country home to the bustle of the city, and was in no haste to change his quarters. Soon after this, Mr. Dempster received a letter asking information in regard to his ward. A cousin, bearing the same name, and but few years his senior, was desirous of making his acquaintance.

Nothing could have been more opportune for Albert Wilson, junior. The cousin lost no time in addressing him, and thus a new influence was brought to bear upon his life.

After an exchange of several letters, they were mutually desirous of meeting; and before the Christmas holidays were over Aunt Dinah was told that another Albert Wilson was coming to the cottage.

"Hope he's good, chile," she said to Mira.

"I am sure that he is," was the reply. "Cousin Albert has read his letters to me, and he writes like a Christian."

"That's right, honey. Spect the good Lord takes care 'bout them things. Don't make no difference what way, easy or hard. He knows all 'bout it."

The guest was heartily welcomed, and soon made himself at home with the children, who regarded him as an old friend.

There was a strong resemblance between the two young men, the disparity in their ages being scarcely apparent. Dissipation and suffering had given to the face of the younger a look which belonged to more advanced years, while that of the elder retained much of the freshness of boyhood.

While she seemed intent only upon serving, Aunt Dinah made an estimate of the new-comer's character, and reported favorably. "He'll do," she said to Rufus, who was careful to avoid seeing or being seen.

His deformity rendered him peculiarly

averse to meeting strangers, and he flattered himself that he should be unnoticed. But one bright morning a rap at the door of his shop announced company.

"Come!" he said, without rising from his bench; and, in answer to his summons, the two cousins stood before him.

"How are you, my old fellow?" exclaimed Albert. "Never darkened the doors of my sick-room; but I'm not going to lay it up against you. This is my first call, and I've brought my better self to share it. Mr. Albert Wilson, senior, this is our friend, Rufus Freeman. Please to be seated."

This running speech, delivered with the greatest good-humor, was quite long enough to give Rufus time to recover from his first surprise. He extended his hand cordially to both visitors, making them welcome to the best accommodations he could offer.

"Don't let us interrupt you," said Albert. "The music of your hammer will make a pleasant accompaniment to our voices."

"I am not so hurried but I can stop

awhile," was the reply. "I don't often receive such visitors."

"A rare occurrence, surely. I have been wishing to see you, and this cousin of mine is anxious to make the acquaintance of our whole family."

For the next few minutes the hammer was plied, a little nervously at intervals, while a desultory sort of talk went on.

At length a remark made by the stranger arrested the attention of Rufus Freeman. Instantly his dark face was all aglow with animation, as he replied earnestly. One subject after another was discussed, upon all of which his ideas were clear and well expressed. "You must have read a great deal, to be so well posted up. You have improved your mind while I have been burning tobacco, and watching the smoke. I've made a precious fool of myself."

"I suppose you know best about that," replied Rufus, to whom this remark had been addressed.

"I know more about it than I wish I did.

I have a great deal to unlearn, and that is just the hardest thing in the world to do," said Albert. "But what can't be cured must be endured," he added, with a touch of his old manner.

A half-reproving glance from his cousin called forth an explanation. "I mean that I must pay the penalty of my folly; and there is no use to spend time in idle regrets. Regrets alone never accomplished any good. It is easy to express sorrow, but difficult to make amends for wrong-doing."

"It would be better not to do the wrong," remarked Rufus.

"Infinitely better," responded the youngest of the trio. "If the boys of the country could be made to believe this, how much misery would be saved."

"I wouldn't confine this knowledge to boys," said his cousin. "Every human being needs to know it, — the old and young, rich and poor, learned and unlearned. More than half the energies of life run to waste."

"That is too moderate a statement. More

than half the energies of life are misdirected. I should like to know what good I have done, in the twenty years of my life. Just about as much as thousands and ten thousands of others, who spend their time in acquiring and fostering habits which will drag them down to perdition. I'm not sure but I had better set up for a reformer," he added, smiling at his own impetuosity.

"You would make a good one," responded Rufus, looking upon the young man with admiration.

"I don't know about that; but I should be in earnest. This is a terrible wicked world. Did you know it?"

"I have seen but little of its wickedness. You know—" and here the speaker paused.

"Yes, I know. But the law of compensation holds good with you, as with others. Ah, I tell you, old fellow, there is nothing so good to carry about with you as a clear conscience."

"True; yet the world looks brighter from

some stand-points than others; if you were leaning on a pair of crutches, for instance."

"Your eyes might, even then, be undimmed," remarked Mr. Wilson, and then adroitly turned the conversation, by speaking of a book which lay on a shelf over the shoemaker's bench.

It seemed to him strange that such a book should be there; more strange still that it should have been read and appreciated. But such was the case, and its contents furnished so varied topics of interest that the whole morning was spent in this consideration.

"There is genius asserting itself under difficulties," said Mr. Wilson, as he went out of the shop.

"Rare genius," was the reply. "Black Rufus, as we call him, would put to blush most white men. He has always been shy of me, and no wonder; although in my worst days I had no inclination to ridicule him. I pity him; yet only his body is mis-

shapen. I wonder how souls would look, if they were to take upon themselves appropriate forms!"

"Do you mean if each sin stamped upon the soul was manifest in a corresponding deformity of body?"

"Yes, that is just what I mean."

"I had never thought of it; but if this were possible there would be some shocking revelations."

"These doors would hardly open to me as they do now," said Albert, about to enter the cottage. "I should be blacker than Rufus, with a form twisted out of all resemblance to humanity."

"Don't think of it. Think only of what you intend to be in the future;" and directly they were confronted with Charley, who complained of their long absence.

This was the first in a series of visits to the shoemaker's shop, which Rufus enjoyed quite as much as his visitors. They were a decided interruption to his work; but he could afford it, since what he lost in time

was more than gained in knowledge, and true appreciation of himself.

Mr. Wilson, as the guest was called by way of distinction, had come with the intention of remaining but few days; yet a week went by, and he seemed in no haste to leave. He was indulging in relaxation from study, previous to commencing the practice of medicine, and found this a pleasant place.

Understanding the peculiar temptations to which boys and young men are exposed, having himself met and conquered them, he was a wise counsellor for one who had weakly and wickedly yielded.

It must not be supposed that it cost Albert no effort to forego the use of stimulants, even here. It was a continual struggle; and sometimes, when appetite asserted its power, he was well-nigh ready to exclaim, "Let me drink and die, if only thus I may be rid of this horrid thirst!"

But he could not remain here idly. The very necessities of his nature compelled him to activity. A visit to his father's rela-

tives was proposed; and, after some deliberation, he decided to accompany his cousin on his return home.

Mira could not object to his going; but the children were loud in their expressions of regret, — a regret which was shared by Aunt Dinah and her boys.

"I thought you were going to stay always," said Charley.

"I hoped you would," added Olly.

"'Pears like the whole family 'goin', honey. Can't hardly bear it. That boy now, he seems jes' like my own; and I'm 'fraid for him. But the good Lord knows all 'bout him. Spect he can take care."

So talked the old friend and nurse, as she bustled about, making all possible arrangements for the comfort of those who were to leave.

Mira, too, feared for her cousin. When again in the world, surrounded by the allurements of society, and the fascinations of what people are pleased to call "elegant pleasures," he might forget the lessons he

had learned, and the pledge he had signed, while on a bed of suffering.

"It would be impossible for me to do this," he exclaimed, in answer to an expression of this fear. "I should not dare to do it," he added. "Besides, I am to have my better self with me, who will allow no indulgence."

"I'll pray for you, chile, jes long's I live," said Aunt Dinah, as she clasped his hand at parting. "'Pears like I'll know when you'se in trouble."

VIII.

Oh, fearful truth!
We learn with tears;
The sin of youth
Again appears.

"HONEY, chile, somethin's the matter with that boy. I see him last night with snakes all roun' him; and one was jes 'roun' his neck like a rainbow. All colors, honey, jes like sunset."

"Why, auntie, what do you mean?" exclaimed Mira Dempster.

"Mean jes what I say, honey. 'Pears like I had a vision, and see that boy. He's in trouble."

"That boy" was Albert Wilson; and he had been away nearly a month, when Aunt Dinah announced the vision. This was her morning greeting to Mira; and a long conversation followed, in which she quaintly and minutely described what she had seen.

Albert Wilson was in a garden of flowers, where the very air seemed heavy with perfume. This induced a delicious languor, and he reclined upon a grassy bank, mindful only of the beauty which surrounded him. He felt not the clasp of serpents, saw not the gleaming of their eyes. Rainbow hues mingled and faded away before his vision, but they were only a part of the outspread landscape.

Mira Dempster sought a natural cause for the dream of which she heard; but her humble friend accepted it as a direct revelation that Albert Wilson was in danger.

"I got right up and kneeled down to pray," said the good woman; and the fact that she was oblivious to cold or fatigue proved how real seemed the danger.

Three letters had been received from Albert, in each of which he spoke confidently of his future course, sure that he could never break his pledge. He was visiting friends who manifested the deepest interest in him, and spared no effort to make the time pass

pleasantly. His cousin kept constant guard, lest temptation might assail him. He had no opportunity for indulging in gloomy reveries or sad reviews of the past. The present was satisfying in its happiness.

"You have yet to see our most charming cousin," said his companion, one morning when they were discussing plans for the day. "I have delayed our visit to Uncle John until Etta should be at home. She returned day before yesterday, and we will go out there to-morrow. I must warn you beforehand that your good resolutions will be put to the test while there. Uncle John is one of those cool, calculating men who are in no particular danger of over-indulgence. He will offer you wine, and perhaps frown if you refuse it."

"That will make no difference," was the reply. "I am bound to keep my pledge, though a dozen Uncle Johns should frown."

"Yes, I don't imagine you will care much for frowns; but the glass may be offered to you with smiles. Cousin Etta follows her

father's example, and sips wine at her own sweet will."

"I don't like that," responded Albert. "But to be forewarned is to be forearmed; so I trust I shall pass the ordeal of both smiles and frowns."

The next morning the two cousins took the early train for Uncle John's, the younger a little absent-minded, as he tried to picture to himself the family he should meet, and the welcome he would receive.

Etta Payne was a sparkling brunette, with eyes black as sloes, and hair dark as a raven's wing. Petite and graceful, dainty in her manners, and gleeful as some bright bird of song, no wonder that she was the idol of her parents and the pet of her friends.

Such was the young girl to whom our hero was introduced, and from whom he received the most cordial of greetings.

"Two cousins Albert!" she exclaimed. "How shall I distinguish one from the other? I shall call you doctor," she added, turning

to him who had a claim to be thus addressed. "I don't like that, because I know I shall grow afraid of you, just as soon as I begin to use it;" and here a low, rippling laugh filled all the room.

"Fancy your being afraid of me," was the reply. "Why, child, I have rocked you to sleep many a time. Do I look very formidable?"

"Not very," she replied, with a repetition of the musical laugh. "But then, doctors are always fearful creatures; hard-hearted and cruel. Poor things! perhaps they can't help it. Any way, I dub you Dr. Wilson," she added, reaching up to lay a delicate hand upon his shoulder.

The hand was quickly imprisoned, and a playful war of words ensued, in which the doctor acknowledged that he was fairly driven from the field.

Albert stood by, wondering if this "darling girl" would ever treat him with like familiarity. He had entered the garden. Forewarned, he fancied himself forearmed.

It might be, but we often overrate our strength.

Uncle John and his wife gave their nephew a hearty welcome; the former, somewhat stately in his manner, yet sincere and earnest.

At dinner, wine was offered to the guests and refused, their host making no effort to change their decision. Indeed, he seemed not to give it a moment's thought, as he drained his own glass. Mrs. Payne, and Etta too, refused, and no comments were made. After dinner, cigars were offered and declined.

"What a singular coincidence!" cried Etta. "I wonder if you two live by the same rule. Nearly every young man I know smokes, and the doctor used to."

"I plead guilty to the charge, cousin mine. But I found it was injuring me, so I gave it up. No more smoking for me; I am better without it."

"And you, Cousin Albert," she said, looking up to her new-found relative.

"I have been an inveterate smoker," was the reply. "It is only a few months since I forswore the habit."

"Did the doctor make a convert of you?"

"I had never seen the doctor then; at least, not this doctor."

Here the topic of conversation was changed. Doctor Wilson had carefully concealed all which might prejudice his friends against Albert, and he had no wish that the young man should himself make any revelation. He was reasonably sure that all would go well; and during this visit especially, he proposed to act as guardian and Mentor.

Unfortunately a despatch summoned him home, the third day of their visit. This was quite as long as they had intended to remain; but the younger cousin was too much pleased with his surroundings to think of leaving them so soon.

"Not strange at all," said the doctor. "I appreciate your feelings. But I must warn you against temptation. It may come in a way you least expect it. Pardon me," he

added, noting the flush upon his companion's face.

"No need for asking pardon, old fellow. You are right; and perhaps I ought to go with you."

"No," was the reply, as Dr. Wilson remembered that this young man must meet and resist temptation for himself. He would have said more; but he saw that his companion was in no mood to listen.

"Come back to-morrow," said Etta, as they stood in the hall. "We will postpone our ride, if you will promise."

"I can't promise," answered her cousin. "I may be able to come, but it is too uncertain for any dependence. You will do well to improve the first pleasant day."

The next day was pleasant, the sleighing perfect, and there was no reason why the young people should delay their ride. Mrs. Payne promised to entertain Dr. Wilson, if he should return, — a promise which was quite superfluous, since he never lacked the ability to entertain himself. Only twenty-

five miles from home, the distance could be quickly passed, and he be there in season to join the sleighing party.

It would have been better had he risen an hour earlier, and gone out in the morning train. He was impressed with this feeling, although he had not really intended to go out at all. As the day wore on, he grew restless, and decided to accept Etta's invitation.

The sunny morning was succeeded by a stormy evening. Dark, threatening clouds drifted athwart the sky. The cold became intense, and snow commenced to fall.

Albert Wilson, with his Cousin Etta and a few others, drove to a neighboring town, intending to return somewhat late in the evening. The threatening weather, however, induced them to change their plans, and hasten a return.

But they were not in season to escape the storm. It came upon them in its fury, and they reached home benumbed with cold.

Mrs. Payne had been suffering with a

headache, which made it necessary that she should retire at an early hour. Mr. Payne was away transacting some business; so the cosey sitting-room had no inmates except those who rushed in from the storm.

The sudden transition produced a greater effect upon the young man than upon his companion. The room seemed revolving like a huge wheel, and he became ghastly pale.

Although suffering herself, Etta restrained her first impulse to call for assistance, not even summoning a servant to bring the wine she desired.

Albert Wilson was hardly conscious when a glass was held to his lips, and a sweet voice bade him drink.

God forgive Etta Payne, for she knew not what she did! That very day, she had, in the presence of her friends, challenged him to drink with her, but he was able to resist. She playfully insisted, and yet he refused.

He thought he would tell her all, during their homeward drive; but something

prevented. It might have been a feeling of false shame; or it might have been an aversion to speak of a disagreeable subject. Certain it is that this young girl held the wine to his lips, with no thought of the wrong she was doing.

He drank it eagerly, and then fell back upon the couch. She filled a glass for herself, and sipped its contents.

"Please to give me more," said her cousin, reaching out his hand. "I am nearly frozen."

This was true ten minutes before; but now the hot blood coursed through his veins like molten lava, mad with thirst. Unsuspectingly the young girl complied with his request. He drank again. Then it was the demon had full possession of him. He put the bottle to his lips, and drained it of the last drop.

Etta looked at him in surprise, wondering if this was a sudden frenzy, induced by cold and exposure. Gradually the truth dawned upon her. Her companion was intoxicated.

She had seen little of hard drinking; but she knew enough of its effects to comprehend this. What could she do?

Her father believed in the moderate use of wine; but he was most bitter in his denunciations of those who were overcome by its influence. He must not see Albert in his present state, and she could not depend upon her mother.

If only the doctor was there, he would know what to do. The doctor *was* there. Etta recognized his step in the hall, and, springing past Albert, who sought to detain her, she sobbed out her trouble, while Dr. Wilson was divesting himself of overcoat and muffler.

"I feared something of the kind," he exclaimed, involuntarily. "Trust him to me," he added. "I can manage him, and no one else need know that this has happened."

No one else would know it from Etta; for, merry and thoughtless as she seemed to be, there was much of consideration in her wise little head. She forgot she was cold,

and, creeping away by herself, sat looking out into the storm, shivering unconsciously.

After the lapse of a few minutes there were uncertain steps on the stairs; and she knew Albert was being assisted to his room. From her retreat she could hear the doctor speaking in low, decided tones.

Then she went back to the fire, and, wrapping a shawl around her, lay down to think. Soon her thoughts became confused. She seemed sinking down into some unfathomable depth, her brain giddy with the descent. When the doctor came back he found another needing his care.

A few quick, convulsive gasps, a sudden quivering of the slight form, and consciousness returned.

"Oh, such a dream as I have had!" whispered Etta, looking up into the manly face which bent over her. "It was dreadful."

Her companion knew well how to soothe her. He had been her confidant since she was a child.

"Don't try to talk until you are better,"

he urged; but finding that she must give expression to her feelings, he listened without further remonstrance, and, after a time, she regained her usual manner.

When Mr. Payne came in, Dr. Wilson made such an explanation of his cousin's absence as quite satisfied the gentleman.

"It wasn't strange that he should feel the cold more than this little girl, who was wrapped in furs from head to foot. He took the brunt of the storm; and a pretty severe one it is too. He must have every attention."

"Certainly, he must," replied Etta. "The doctor came just in time. It is *so* nice to have a physician in the family!" she added, with a laugh.

If ever one woke to shame and suffering, Albert Wilson did so the next morning. A distracting headache, and with it a distracting sense of guilt. The events of the previous evening passed before him. Despairing and reckless, he wished to leave his uncle's at once, and go, it mattered not

where, only so that he could gratify his thirst for strong drink. "All over with me now," he thought. "I have broken my pledge, and disgraced myself for life."

If he could get out of the house without being seen, he would go at once. But his cousin occupied another bed in the room with himself, and he could hardly expect to elude his vigilance. For the first time, he felt annoyed at the presence of this cousin.

Mira Dempster had inferred from his letters that Dr. Wilson was a Christian; and she had been correct in the inference. He was an earnest Christian; yet zeal was tempered with knowledge. He never repelled where he sought to win. He believed religion to be a *crown*, not a *cross*, and as such he always spoke of it.

"No need of giving up the pleasures of life in order to be a Christian," he would say. "Vices must be given up; but no one is the happier for indulging in vice. The vicious are of all men most miserable."

Why was it that these words rang in the

ear of Albert Wilson, making themselves heard above the clamorings of appetite? His cousin seemed to be sleeping, while, in reality, he was praying.

At the first movement which betrayed the wakefulness of his room-mate, the doctor arose and lighted a fire in the large, old-fashioned grate. Soon a cheerful blaze lighted up the room, but not a word was spoken.

At length, tiring of silence, and sure that Albert was awake, his cousin approached the bed and addressed him in the usual manner.

"Is it time to get up?" asked Albert, after replying to the greeting.

"I thought it time for me," was the reply. "You had better indulge yourself in a little more sleep. I will make all necessary apologies for you, and Etta will gladly keep you company at a late breakfast."

"I never wish to see her again," now exclaimed the young man. "Why don't you tell her what a wretch I am? Don't

you despise me?" he asked, in the same breath.

"Of course I don't. On the whole, I believe I never had quite so much true regard for you as at this present moment."

"But I've broken my pledge; gone back into the depths, and sealed my ruin," cried Albert, with an excited voice. "Hasn't anybody told you?"

"I know all about it; but there is no need of making it appear worse than it is," was the quiet reply. "You were chilled, and Etta gave you wine, without knowing that she was doing you an injury. You could hardly be considered accountable in such a state as you then were."

"But I drank afterwards; I am sure that I did!" he added, pressing his hands upon his head, as though to still its wild throbbing. "I have only a confused idea of what happened; but it must have been bad enough."

"Don't think of it."

"But I must. I ought to think of it; and I couldn't help doing so if I would. I am weak now; I have lost the power of resistance, and should yield again if tempted. I am afraid I shall do even worse than that."

"Oh, no! Let us have no more such talk," said Dr. Wilson. "Your head isn't quite right this morning; you need rest, and I can give you something which will help you to get it."

Going to his valise, he took from it a vial, and, dropping some of its contents into a glass partly filled with water, gave it to his cousin.

"It will do you good," he said. "Now don't torture yourself with regrets. When you are better we will talk the matter all over. Until then rest in the certainty that you can redeem the past. Etta will never betray you."

"I intended to tell her all about myself when we were coming home last evening; but I didn't."

"She knows all that is necessary. I took the liberty to tell her. Was I right in doing so?"

"You are always right."

"Not always; but in this case I think I did what was best."

Much solicitude was expressed in regard to Albert that morning, and in response Dr. Wilson acknowledged that he was the worse for having drunk wine. Mr. Payne demurred at this, ridiculing the idea that a glass of wine would injure any one.

"But Albert can never drink without injury," said the doctor. "He has tried it, and is convinced that there is nothing but total abstinence for him."

"He was the only young man who refused wine at dinner yesterday," said Etta, joining in the conversation. "I asked him to drink with me, and I ridiculed him for refusing. I gave him wine last night; but I wouldn't do it again, under any circumstances; and I never will ask another young man to drink with me so long as I live."

"You may regret that promise," remarked her father, coolly.

"I don't think there is any danger," she replied. "But if I do, I will keep it all the same."

"You are making a serious matter of it," said her father, looking at her admiringly. "You always manage to get up more enthusiasm than any one else."

Thus what threatened to be a disgraceful exposé of Albert Wilson's unfortunate career of dissipation was passed over easily, without in any way compromising the truth.

"We shall consider our new cousin as your especial charge while he keeps his room," said Mrs. Payne to her favorite nephew.

"I presume the doctor rejoices in an opportunity to try his skill," remarked Etta, with a laugh. "This may be his first case."

First case or second, it certainly was one in which he felt a deep interest, — far deeper than any one present suspected. Everything

depended upon its treatment; more than life or happiness was at stake.

Albert slept so soundly that he neither saw nor heard his cousin; yet the fire was replenished from time to time, and the room put in order.

The second waking was more tolerable than the first. The cloud had lifted, and hope was in the ascendant. But he had looked back, and he must pay the penalty. Cousin Mi, Aunt Dinah, black Rufus, and Edgar must all know this.

Perhaps it was strange it should be so; but of all these he dreaded most to lose the good opinion of his deformed friend. So good himself, so far removed from temptation, would he have charity for one who had weakly yielded to sin?

In the midst of these reflections it occurred to Albert that it must be past noon, and it would be well for him to throw off his drowsiness. He was nearly dressed, when his cousin appeared, cheerful and social.

"I thought I would see if there was any

prospect of having your company at the dinner-table."

"I shall be there, sure," was the reply. "I am just about famished."

"An excellent symptom in your case," remarked the doctor. "I am glad to hear it; and, judging from the preparations I have seen, there will be sufficient to satisfy you."

He wished to say something about wine, which was sure to be upon the table, and was considering how he should introduce the subject, when Albert spoke of it in such a way as to banish his fears.

Etta made sure of an opportunity to express her sympathy and regrets; but, when seated at the table, she chattered as merrily as though no serious thought had ever troubled her.

"Now, father, put your wine just as far from us as possible. Cousin Albert and I are not to be tempted any more. When we are frozen again we shall call for hot coffee and sandwiches."

"A good exchange," responded the doctor,

as his little cousin closed her remarks with the usual rippling laugh.

After dinner, Etta Payne and Albert Wilson held a long, earnest conversation, in which he found courage to tell her what she should have known the day before.

"I must have been rude to you last evening," he said in conclusion. "Grant me your pardon for that, and I will promise never to offend again."

"The pardon is granted," she replied, while a faint blush mantled her cheek. "I was more in fault than you, and I wish to ask your forgiveness."

"Never ask my forgiveness!" he exclaimed, impulsively. "If I had been what I should be —"

"No more disparagement of yourself," interrupted Etta, playfully. "Henceforth I hold you bound to say only good of my cousin;" and she extended her hand in token of friendship.

Dr. Wilson had been anxious that his cousin should not make too serious a matter

of this fall; but he was equally anxious that a salutary lesson should be learned from it. That night, after going to their room, he took occasion to make some remark, which led to a free interchange of opinions and feelings.

"I know that I have done a terrible thing," said Albert. "It will take me a long time to get back where I was forty-eight hours ago; but, thanks to you, I shall try it."

After this, both sat looking into the fire, with that fixedness of gaze which betrays a preoccupied mind. Dr. Wilson, unwilling to disturb a current of thought which might lead to wiser resolves, waited for his companion to speak.

At length, the younger said, "I've been thinking upon a subject, which, perhaps, your superior knowledge may help me to understand."

"My knowledge may not be so superior as you imagine; but, such as it is, you are welcome to share it."

"Well, then, for the question: Why do

men and boys indulge in habits which they would condemn in their daughters and sisters? That may be a queer question for me to ask, but it has puzzled me greatly."

This same question had occurred to the doctor, as it certainly has to all who seek to solve the great problem of human society. But he was surprised that it should be asked then and there. Indeed, he was often surprised by his cousin, who seemed a combination of opposing elements. A generous and affectionate nature had been sadly warped by a career of dissipation; and yet it retained much of its original nobility. Something of a philosopher, too, was Albert Wilson, despite his career of recklessness.

"My knowledge is utterly at fault here," was the reply he received. "I don't know why a man should swear, when he would condemn a woman for uttering an oath, and I certainly know of no reason why he who finds pleasure in the use of tobacco should be unwilling that his wife and sisters should share the pleasure."

"Guess you are a little beyond your reckoning there, old fellow," exclaimed Albert, with a quizzical smile. "Just think of going home, to find all the women of the family engaged in the delightful occupation of chewing tobacco! Bah!" he added, with an expression of extreme disgust. "The bar-room of a groggery would be paradise to such a home as that."

"I don't know about it. I should condemn both the bar-room and the home; but, if there is any real good to be derived from the use of tobacco, why not give women the benefit of it? But perhaps you think smoking less objectionable than chewing."

"I do. It is less filthy. Yet I never could stand seeing a woman smoke. Just fancy a group of pretty, sweet little girls, ten or twelve years of age, trying to get accustomed to the taste and smoke of cigars."

"It would be a most disgusting sight," was the answer. "But I have a distinct remembrance of a like scene, in which boys

were the actors. There was nothing very attractive about that. But smoking was a manly habit, and must be learned. So we puffed away, until head and stomach refused longer to endure the torture."

"That's the way it's done. Hard work and poor wages. I tell you, though, if all the women had Aunt Dinah's hatred of tobacco, there would be a revolution in the habits of men."

"A revolution for which we should most devoutly pray. Banish tobacco, and intoxicating liquors will soon follow. Smoking and chewing make way for drinking. They induce a thirst which water cannot satisfy."

"I know the truth of that by experience," said Albert, with emphasis.

It was long past midnight ere these cousins retired to rest. So much was to be said, so many plans considered, that there was no thought of sleep until the old clock in the hall struck two.

"Not another word!" then exclaimed the

doctor. "You need sleep, and I shall be none the worse for it."

"I need some other things more than I need sleep," was the reply. "I can sleep when away from you."

Notwithstanding their late vigils, they were at the breakfast table, professing to have slept well.

This was the last day of their visit. Dr. Wilson had made arrangements for opening an office the following week, and his "worser-self," as the younger cousin said, was beginning to feel the necessity of engaging in some business. He had been idle for several months, and it was time to "turn over a new leaf."

A situation had been offered him by a friend of his father, and he was inclined to accept it. How far his guardian could or would interfere remained to be seen. He had been allowed to spend money freely, without giving account for the same; but, in answer to his last application, some advice had been volunteered, which he had deemed

to be as inappropriate as it was unnecessary.

Hiram Dempster still urged the return of his ward to the position he had formerly occupied, and it seemed best that his demands should be answered in person. Dr. Wilson would accompany his cousin, if the trip was made at once.

Uncle John and his wife, with their charming daughter, all protested that the visit had been quite too short; yet, if short, it had been eventful.

Etta Payne had not only decided never to ask any one to drink wine *with* her, but she had also decided never to drink wine herself. "I never thought about it before," she said to the doctor. "I supposed, of course, father was right; but I see now that it is all wrong."

She whispered the same to Albert, making him happy by the assurance that she should ever feel an interest in his welfare. "If you go wrong, I shall consider myself in some way responsible for it," she said.

"If I go wrong, it will be entirely my own fault," was the reply; and more might have been added, but at that moment the doctor exclaimed, "Time is up," and with hasty adieus they separated.

"Two fine young men," said Mr. Payne. "I remember of hearing that Albert, junior, was inclined to be rather reckless; but there is no appearance of it now. He seems like a very fine young man."

The future would determine whether this seeming was a reality.

IX.

Rowing up the stream,
  With a goal in view;
Never time to dream,
  Only time to do;
Never off his guard,
None his course retard.

Hiram Dempster was greatly annoyed by the presence of *two* young gentlemen, when he had expected but *one*. Albert had written of his coming, but purposely avoided mentioning a companion.

They arrived just in season for dinner, so that at the outset there was an opportunity for the test of principle. Wine was refused without any display of feeling, and all expressions of surprise were parried lightly.

"You are looking well," said Mr. Dempster to his nephew. "I presume you have entirely recovered from the effects of your unfortunate ride."

"Quite recovered from my injuries; but I am getting to think that ride the most fortunate one of my life," replied Albert, wishing at once to introduce the subject which he knew his guardian would seek to avoid. "The long confinement which followed was a real blessing."

"The blessing came in disguise," responded Mr. Dempster.

"But the disguise was soon torn off. I was obliged to think, and it was impossible not to think seriously in such a condition."

"You are welcome to your own ideas of that," said Mr. Dempster, impatiently. "I have no time to waste. I want to know what I may expect of you for the next year."

"Nothing," was the laconic answer.

"Nothing!" repeated the gentleman, in a tone of angry surprise. "You must know that I have a right to demand something of you; you were placed under my care until you should become of age."

"Yes, sir, and perhaps it would be well for me to ask what you desire."

Off his guard again! Hiram Dempster was angry with himself for having spoken hastily.

"I need you in the store," he said. "I was willing you should go through college, and study a profession; but you preferred a more active life."

"I still prefer it. I intend to be a merchant, and wish to commence in the business I am to follow."

"What is that?"

In reply, Albert told him of the situation which had been offered.

"Our firm will do better by you than that," said his guardian. "You can make your fortune in a few years."

"But I have told you that I shall never enter that store again in the way of business. You can't have forgotten it."

"I never charge my memory with such boyish speeches," was the sneering reply.

Albert Wilson's eyes flashed, and an oath trembled on his lips; but with a mighty effort he controlled himself. "It may have been a boyish speech," he said. "It was made by a boy; yet boys sometimes have the decision of men. Do you wish me to repeat it?"

"It makes no difference to me whether it is repeated or not. We seem to be playing at cross-purposes."

"It don't seem so to me. I am sure I understand you, and I think you must understand me. You wish me to enter your store in some capacity; and this I am determined never to do."

"Then I don't see that we have anything further to do with each other. You refuse to be governed by my wishes, and I have no desire to enforce them by commands."

"I suppose there must be a settlement between us in about a year from this time," said Albert.

"I shall be ready for the settlement," was the quick reply. "I suppose in future you

will not wish to consider my home as yours."

"You must decide that," answered the young man, with an undertone of sadness in his voice. "I love the children, and would gladly save Charley from the experience I have known."

A sudden change passed over the father's face. Love for Charley was his vulnerable point. He loved his daughters; but he did not fear for them as for his son. Whatever he was himself, he wished Charley to be an honorable, upright man. The thought that his child, now pure and innocent, should ever become vile and wretched, moved this wicked man strangely.

For the moment he felt something like regret and remorse; but he would express neither. If he had accumulated the fortune he desired, he could afford to give up his nefarious traffic; but, under the circumstances, he must go on.

He remembered, however, that it might be for his interest to preserve an outward

show of friendship for his ward, and governed himself accordingly. Having been foiled at every step, he decided to yield with as good grace as possible. A shallow apology was received in the same spirit it was made, Albert Wilson wishing to retain the privilege of visiting his cousins at pleasure.

The doctor, not having been present at this interview, knew little of what transpired. During the remainder of their stay in the city nothing more was said in regard to business, and the time passed not unpleasantly.

Albert's old associates assailed him with ridicule; but their shafts fell powerless.

"It's all that doctor's doings," said one. "If we could get Al out from under his thumb he would be as good a fellow as ever."

"Don't know about that," said another. "He has quit the governor, store, and all. Guess there is something more in it than we can see."

These are only specimens of the remarks made; but Albert went his way regardless

of them all; making no explanation of his conduct, other then to assert his determination to persevere in his present course of abstinence.

"I think I must see Cousin Mi and Aunt Dinah before I settle down to business," he said, when speaking of the future. "Some way, I don't feel satisfied with only writing to them. What say, old fellow, will you go with me, or shall we part here?"

"I shall go with you," was Dr. Wilson's reply. "I ought to be at home, but—"

"I understand," responded Albert. "You are sure of a welcome as I am myself. We shall take them all by surprise;" and, with boyish impatience, he set about making preparations to leave.

He parted from his guardian civilly, who, knowing his destination, sent a box of delicacies to the children.

Aunt Dinah's dream had a depressing effect, not only upon herself, but upon Mira and Rufus. Edgar, who now shared his mother's confidence, was disposed to consider

it a proof of some physical derangement, rather than a vision from the Lord. Mira and Rufus had no faith in dreams; but, being anxious in regard to Albert, they could not forget what had been told them.

Great, then, was the surprise and joy when the two cousins made their appearance. The children shouted with delight; Aunt Dinah, who, through the moonlight caught a glimpse of the young men, came in without ceremony.

"O chile, thank the good Lord for this!" she exclaimed, clasping Albert's hands. "I'se been troubled 'bout you, chile."

"No need of that," was the reply. "I am all right, only *terrible* hungry."

"Spect you may be, chile. I'll see about supper."

Dr. Wilson stood by, smiling at the hearty manners of this good woman, and waiting until it should be her pleasure to address him.

"You are welcome, sir," she said, at length, as she turned to the kitchen. But

he was not satisfied. He wished for something more than this short, ceremonious speech, and claimed it in such a way as made Aunt Dinah's face perfectly radiant with joy. "Spect I *am* glad to see you, sir," she said, in answer to his question.

Supper was soon ready, and received the praise it deserved. "Delicious coffee, hot muffins, and tongue. You must have had a presentiment of our coming," said Albert.

"Spect I was thinkin' 'bout you," answered the gratified woman.

Supper over, Albert wished to see Rufus and Edgar; but Dr. Wilson chose to postpone his visit until morning.

The brothers felt complimented by so early a call; and naturally there was much to be said.

Edgar was progressing in his studies and in his regard for Miss Marvin. She not only taught him how to study; but she also taught him how to read, and make the most of all his advantages.

"I can't tell what I shall do," he said, in

reply to a question asked by Albert. "I mean to know as much as I can, and then make the best possible use of my knowledge."

"That's the way, old fellow," was the hearty response. "There's my hand to your success, and if ever I can help you, remember I shall be glad to do it. I shall be in business some time for myself, and then we will see what can be done for you."

Edgar began to express his thanks for this manifestation of interest, but was quickly interrupted.

"Do you remember what you did for me last fall?" exclaimed Albert. "Lifting me as though I had been a baby! Do you suppose I shall ever forget that? I only hope I shall be able to give you a lift some time. It is of no use to put off a bad job," he said, after some further conversation. "I want you to know how I have made out keeping my pledge."

"We can judge of that by your looks," answered Rufus, with a smile.

"Looks are deceitful, as you will find, when I tell you that I have been drunk since I saw you before. There, I knew just how you would look when you heard it," he added, as a strangely sad expression came over the faces of his companions. "I might have kept it to myself and never have told you; but I wanted you to know. I thought I should feel better, and I am sure I can trust you not to expose me. I have repented of it; yet it was a severe lesson."

The question, "How did it happen?" trembled on the lips of the brothers; but an instinctive delicacy forbade their speaking. Albert, however, told the story, and two long-drawn breaths testified to the relief of the listeners. "I don't see that you were to blame," said Rufus. "You were not responsible for drinking under such circumstances."

"I am glad to hear you say so," was the reply. "The responsibility lay back of that. You can take wine as a medicine, and it may do you good; but I can never taste it with

safety. It would be better for me to die than run the risk. If it hadn't been for my cousin I should have gone straight back to rum and ruin."

"Thank the Lord that you didn't," cried Rufus, with streaming eyes.

"I have thanked him," replied the young man. "I do thank him every day of my life, and I ask him for strength to persevere to the end," he added, in a lower tone.

Edgar was wondering why this confession was made, and thinking that he would never have acknowledged such a fall.

"What is it?" asked Albert. "You look as though you had something to say."

"What made you tell us? I shouldn't, if I'd been in your place."

"If I hadn't, you would never have suspected it, I know you wouldn't; but some way I wanted to tell you. It would have seemed like trying to deceive you, if I had kept silent. Moreover, I shall feel stronger for having talked about it. I know I can trust you."

Rufus had no words to answer this remark; but the strong grasp of his hand gave assurance that this confidence was not misplaced.

Edgar said, "Trust me through thick and thin. I am not given to reporting family matters. Mother has trained me better than that."

"Better than what?" asked Aunt Dinah, who entered the kitchen in time to hear this closing sentence.

"Better than to tell all I know," was the reply.

"I will tell you all about it," said Albert. "Did you know I had been in trouble while I was gone? You said you should know, and pray for me."

"I spected you was in trouble, chile."

"Mother had a dream," interrupted Edgar.

"'Peared like 'twas a vision, boy. Tell me 'bout the trouble," she added, looking earnestly at Albert.

He told her in as few words as possible.

"Bless de Lord! 'Twan't nothin' very bad

Not half's bad's I spected." Thus Aunt Dinah expressed her relief. "'Twan't no blame for you. Wine's counted good for freezin'. That chile, Etta, didn't mean no harm neither."

"But I broke my pledge."

"Yes, chile; but 'twan't wilful breakin'. Spect you'll keep it now."

"I hope so," replied Albert. "Yet I would give every dollar I am worth, if I had never acquired the habits of smoking and drinking."

A short, low whistle expressed Edgar's ideas of this.

"I suppose you think that would be a large price to pay for nothing," remarked his friend.

"I should think it was. Any way, if I had the money, I shouldn't let it go so easy."

"Money, boy!" exclaimed Aunt Dinah. "Don't talk 'bout money that way. 'Pears like it's a snare of the devil."

"You are right, auntie, and I wish it was the only snare he puts in the way of poor

mortals. But it isn't. I've had both feet in several of his snares, and know more about them than I wish I did."

Aunt Dinah had many inquiries to make, and Albert was quite willing to answer her questions. She had earned the right to ask them.

"I'se glad," she said, with a nod of approbation, when he had given her an outline of his plans, so far as they were matured. "I'se thankful," she added, with emphasis. "'Pears like your mother knows all 'bout this."

"I hope she does," responded Albert, and then fell to musing in a way he always did when recalling the teachings of his mother. Not long after, he bade his friends good-night and went home.

"The children were very sorry not to see you again before they went to bed," said Mira, after his return.

"I had no intention of staying away so long; but we kept talking, and the time passed quickly. Moreover, I shouldn't have

supposed there was much danger of my being missed."

"You have been missed," responded the doctor. "Charley asked Aunt Dinah to send you home, because he needed you more than she did."

This was very different from the old time, when his step thrilled Mira's heart with fear, and the children had been glad to escape from his presence. In a long conversation, the following morning, this change was mentioned with expressions of gratitude and pleasure.

"I hated myself for being so hateful to you," said Albert. "Some evil spirit must have possessed me, or I should never have done as I did."

"Aunt Dinah's pledge exorcised the evil spirit," replied Mira.

"I thought so, but — " and here followed a repetition of the confession he had made the previous evening.

It was passed over lightly, much to the relief of the young man, who congratulated

himself that he need never again mention the humiliating circumstance.

"Forget it," said Mira. "It was unfortunate, yet not sinful."

"I wish I could see it in that light," was the reply. "But I can't divest myself of the feeling that I was responsible. I hope and pray such an event may never occur again. I learned my weakness."

"God gives strength to those who ask him."

As Mira said this, Albert Wilson clasped her hands, exclaiming, "You have been my good angel, dear cousin. There has been a heavy burden upon you, but I will help to carry it in future. Charley shall be my especial care."

"My father!" sighed the young girl.

A flush mantled the cheek of her companion.

"I can do nothing for him," was the reply.

"I wish I could atone for his sins," said this self-sacrificing daughter. "I know he has done wrong by you, but I could not help it."

Albert did not wish to talk of this, and, playfully closing her mouth, began to speak of other things.

Only one day, and that so short! Then the cottage was left to its usual inmates; but there lingered a crowd of pleasant memories and bright hopes.

The interpretation of Aunt Dinah's dream had been declared, and she was ready for a new revelation. Castle-building was no part of her regular occupation; but she found time for the construction of one which seemed to her of fair proportions, although it was located in the land of shadows.

Long and frequent letters were received from Albert, who was satisfied with his business, and looked eagerly forward to the time when he should "set up for himself." He was among relatives, to whose homes he was ever welcome; yet he often missed the excitement to which he had been so long accustomed. Each day suffering some part of the penalty which sin is sure to inflict, he

felt more and more the need of divine forgiveness and assistance.

Meanwhile, Hiram Dempster had accepted the fact that the property of his ward must be given up to its rightful owner, and he made a careful estimate of its amount. He did this, too, with less reluctance than he would once have thought possible. In some way he seemed to be doing it for Charley.

As the last year of Albert Wilson's minority was marked by few striking incidents, we will not linger over it. More than the ordinary amount of business was transacted by the firm of which his guardian was a member, and the profits were much larger than usual.

"A good year," said the liquor-dealer to himself, and was ready to meet his ward at the appointed time.

Much to Albert's surprise there was no attempt to deal dishonestly. A fair statement was made, papers submitted, certificates of stock given, and money paid. The necessary documents were signed, and

Albert knew how much he could call his own.

Not a large fortune; but yet enough to give him a fair start in the world. Enough, if he made good use of it; quite too much if spent in dissipation, to which he was not now inclined.

In anticipation of this time, and in consideration of rare business talents, his employer had proposed to take him as partner. This being what he desired, his whole property was at once invested.

"The best thing which ever happened to you," said Dr. Wilson, in offering his congratulations.

"You are mistaken there," was the reply. "Signing Aunt Dinah's pledge was the best thing, and this is one of the consequences. I have nothing to do now but work and rejoice."

Soon after this he made a short visit to his cousins.

"So your business with father is completed," said Mira, after he had given her an

account of the settlement. "I have felt very anxious about it."

"No more cause for anxiety; I am entirely satisfied."

Albert Wilson made this assertion; but it is doubtful if Hiram Dempster could have echoed it. He certainly could not in some conditions; yet he was glad that the business was finally settled.

There was now no disguising the fact that he was a hard-drinker. Even when with his children, he managed to indulge his love of liquor. This was not done openly, yet his daughter knew, and so did Aunt Dinah, with her boys. Mira once attempted to remonstrate, but she was unfortunate in her choice of time, and met a harsh repulse. He refused to listen, bidding her go about her own business.

It seemed to her that this was her business, caring for others, and seeking to restrain them from evil. As ever, Aunt Dinah shared her troubles, and helped her to bear them.

"Jes tell the good Lord, and he'll see 'bout it. That boy's saved, and there don't nothin' now seem hard to me. I spect great things, and 'pears like they'll come."

Olly and Charley both noticed the change in their father's looks.

"What makes your cheeks so red and fat?" asked Charley one day, while caressing with his dimpled hand the coarse, bloated face.

"I don't know what does make them so," was the reply; but the deepened color of these same red cheeks bore testimony to its untruth.

Much to the father's annoyance this subject was pursued, until Mira called Charley into another room. Hiram Dempster then rose from his chair, and stood before the mirror. He had prided himself upon his fine face and figure; small reason was there for this now, as he reluctantly acknowledged. But then, his purse was plethoric, and that would offset against many disadvantages.

Aunt Dinah would "jes hated that bad man," if it had not been against her creed to hate

any one. As it was, she avoided him as much as possible.

Albert Wilson's visit was made the week following that of his uncle; and although Mira could not bring herself to speak directly of her father's condition, he was at no loss to account for her pale, sad face.

Dinah Freeman had no scruples, and expressed her ideas with characteristic plainness. "His money'll go. Tell you that, chile. He won't 'scape punishment. Hope some body'll take honey way from him; but there's the children. Don't know nothin' what'll come of them. I'll do jes long's I can; but them children needs more'n me."

"They can't go far wrong, while with you," replied Albert; "Mira can manage Olly."

"Yes, chile, I know 'bout her."

"I know that the trouble will be with Charley; but we must hope for the best. Trust the good Lord, and keep praying."

That she should have lived to hear this from the once reckless boy! It was more than Aunt Dinah could bear with calmness. Tears

streamed down her cheeks, as she sobbed forth her gratitude.

"I spect great things now," she said. "Nothin's too hard."

It did seem so; for never was greater change than had been wrought in the character and habits of this young man. Without presuming to consider himself a Christian, he was really actuated by Christian principles; and, mindful that many precious hours had run to waste, he applied himself with diligence to the duties before him.

Mira Dempster found in him a sympathizing friend, who, engaged in active pursuits, looked upon the world hopefully, and inspired her with something of his own cheerful spirit.

"Prove the sincerity of your repentance by good works," Dr. Wilson had said to him; and he obeyed the injunction. With Charley he enforced the teachings of Sister Mi, assuring the child that she knew just what would make him a good man.

Here he would gladly have lingered, but business demanded attention. Then, there

was Uncle John to be visited, or, rather, Uncle John's charming daughter, who retained her interest in Cousin Albert. She, also, held fast to the resolution never to drink wine, although many attempts had been made to change her purpose.

"Joined the teetotalers?" asked one gentleman, who was a frequent guest at her father's, and felt himself privileged.

"Yes," was the reply. "I have joined them, and intend to be a working member of the order."

"Then I suppose you have a pledge, duly signed, and handsomely framed."

"I have never signed a pledge," said the young lady. "I shall do so, however, the first opportunity," she added, her face lighting up with enthusiasm.

"You might do good service by presenting the pledge to your friends. They would find it difficult to resist your pleadings."

"I should present it first to father, and see what influence I have at home."

"He could hardly refuse you. I certainly

hope you will not put me to the test. I should give up the wine; but I choose to drink it, and still receive your smiles."

Gallant speeches, which Etta Payne prized at their true value; yet they suggested a train of thought which might lead to action in the future.

Albert Wilson had no secrets from her now. It might seem strange to one not versed in human nature, that she, with her inexperience, could give him just the counsel and encouragement he needed. But such was the case. She held the wine-cup to his lips; but she had long ago made amends for that mistake.

"I wish you and Cousin Mi could meet," said Albert. "She has been like a sister to me, and a darling sister too."

"Bring her to see me," replied Etta. "I have heard so much of her, that I am sure I should recognize her at sight; and I know I should love her."

"Everybody who knows her loves her," responded the young man. "I hope she will one day find her true place in the world,

where she can be as happy as she deserves to be."

Mr. and Mrs. Payne had known Mira Dempster while she lived with their brother, and Etta expressed a wish that she would visit them.

Mira had her circle of friends, whose hospitalities she received and returned; but she seldom went from home to be absent more than a few hours. She felt herself bound to the children, and consulted their interests before her own.

Knowing this, Albert had some misgivings as to the success of her plan; but he wrote at once, inviting her to visit his relatives, who remembered her as a child, and would gladly renew the acquaintance.

"That's it, honey," exclaimed Aunt Dinah, when the letter was read to her. "'Pears like it's jes what you need. I'll take care them children. Won't nothin' happen to 'em."

"But I can't go, auntie. Father wouldn't be willing that I should," said Mira.

He was not willing. Albert Wilson's rela-

tives were the last persons he would have wished his daughter to visit. But, on the other hand, he was not quite ready to refuse her request. She had devoted herself so cheerfully to the care of her brother and sister, and, in doing this, been debarred from so many pleasures, that he could hardly find it in his heart to deny her this gratification.

So he wrote he would think the matter over, and tell her his decision when he saw her.

"I had better give up all thoughts of going," was Mira's conclusion as she read this. But a letter from Etta Payne ruffled her spirit of resignation, and she *hoped* her father would consent to the proposed journey.

Hope was changed to glad fruition, when he appeared and told her she could go. But she must go as befitted his daughter; and he had purchased materials for an addition to her wardrobe. In doing this, he had not been careful of expense, and with the aid of a skilful dress-maker costly fabrics were transformed into elegant dresses.

Arrangements were made for the care of the children, and Mira accompanied her father on his return to the city. Here she spent a few days, not unpleasantly, and then proceeded to her destination. As had been previously arranged, Albert accompanied her to Mr. Payne's.

No welcome could have been more cordial than was given her there, Etta claiming her as cousin and friend.

"Ask the doctor to come out with you," whispered Etta, as Albert was about to say good-by. "Tell him I have a friend visiting me, whom I wish him to see."

"I will tell him," was the reply. "You will be sure to see him, as soon as he can leave his patients."

Dr. Wilson was a hard worker in the profession he had chosen, allowing himself little time for recreation. But he did take time to go out to Uncle John's, and seemed in no especial haste to leave.

His "little cousin" was inclined to ask some questions in regard to his new-found

leisure, and would have continued her investigations had he not discovered a way to silence her.

"Well, doctor, I must acknowledge that I am glad to see you here, under *any* circumstances," she said, with a laugh. "I might be afraid of you, if Mira was not here; so I bless you both for coming."

A train of seemingly disconnected events had brought about this meeting; yet from the time when Albert Wilson had lain by the roadside, bruised and bleeding, everything had tended toward it. That was the turning-point of his life, and the change in him had an effect upon others.

Thus, from seeming evil, good may be evoked; while discipline ofttimes leads to happiness.

X.

A duty bravely done,
A hero's chaplet won,
  Thus life was given;
And one more earthly child,
With sin no more defiled,
  Went home to Heaven.

Mira Dempster and Etta Payne were as welcome guests as ever entered the homes of hospitable friends. They carried with them sunshine and gladness, filling spacious rooms, or narrow rooms, it mattered not which, with the music of their voices.

Mira had thought it impossible to be absent from home more than a month, but she was persuaded to add another week to the allotted time. This she did, with the consent of her father, and the approval of Aunt Dinah, from whom she heard semi-weekly, Rufus acting as amanuensis.

The children were well and happy; anx-

ious to see Sister Mi, yet willing she should stay and have a good time.

Albert would not allow her to be unhappy. He prophesied everything good for her in the future; and even expressed the belief that her father would some time repent of his past and present life.

"He is not so bad as I thought," said the young man. "He loves money, and will have it, in one way or another; but he loves his children too, and I think that, in some way, he will be saved. I don't know how," he continued, in answer to a question asked by his cousin. "Aunt Dinah has faith that he will become a good man. If he would sign her pledge, he would be all right."

"If he would give up his business," rejoined Mira.

"That would follow. Let him give up swearing, smoking, and drinking, and the store would be a place of such torture that he couldn't endure it."

This visit came to an end; but Etta Payne accompanied her friend when she returned

home. "I must see Aunt Dinah and the children," said Etta to her parents.

Aunt Dinah felt greatly complimented when the laughing girl told her of this, and the children thought it was very good in Cousin Etta to wish to see them.

The garden was blooming with its wealth of summer flowers, and from the cottage windows peeped sweet young faces, beaming with happiness. There was laughter and song, music and mirth. The long days were all too short.

For the time, Mira Dempster ignored care and anxiety; indeed, she could hardly do otherwise while with her present companion. Etta was delighted with everything she saw or heard. Flitting from the parlor to the kitchen, from the garden to the shop, she went everywhere, singing and rejoicing. She coaxed Aunt Dinah to show her "the pledge;" and directly under Albert Wilson's name she traced her own in fairy-like characters.

"I wish I could manage to get that pledge into my possession," she said to her friend.

"What do you suppose would induce Aunt Dinah to give it to me?"

By chance, the owner of the pledge heard this question and answered for herself.

"Can't never spare that, Miss Etta; I'd give you most anything but that."

Then, if she couldn't have the original, could she have a copy? This seemed a reasonable request, and was granted at once, Rufus cheerfully performing his part. The names were added, leaving a space for Albert's. A scarlet ribbon bound the tiny roll, and Etta possessed a pledge as nearly like Aunt Dinah's as it was possible a copy should be.

"Albert will sign it the first time I see him," she said, confidently.

"I wish that boy here this minute."

"What boy, Mi?" asked Charley, coming in from the garden.

"'Twan't you I talked 'bout, chile; but ole auntie always glad to see you. Spect you'd like to see your Cousin Albert."

"I guess I should. He's most as good as

Sister Mi ;" and here Charley whispered something in Aunt Dinah's ear, which caused her to exclaim : —

"Bless de good Lord ! "

Albert wished himself at the home cottage quite as much as any one wished to have him there ; but he was forced to be content with a frequent interchange of letters.

"No prospect of my coming at present," he wrote. "Tell Rufus I envy him the pleasure of drifting down the river with you all. I am rowing up stream, and hope some time to reach a haven, not of rest, but recompense."

"I wish Albert was here to help you," said Mira, one afternoon when Rufus was doing duty as boatman.

"I wish he *was* here, but I have no especial need of help. I have always enjoyed being on the water, ever since I was old enough to handle the oars ; and I know every rod of this channel as well as I know our own garden. Edgar wished to come, but it is a busy time with farmers."

Nevertheless, the party had not been long at the fishing-ground, when Charley was sure he heard Edgar's whistle, and directly the young man was seen making rapid strides toward the river.

"I managed to get through my work; so I thought I would come over," he said, in answer to the greetings received.

They were all glad of Edgar's coming, as he knew every rod of the shore, and could tell them many curious things connected with wood-craft and hunting. His strong arms were at the service of the whole party. Where they could not walk he carried them.

But for Rufus, who remained in the boat, fishing, there would have been small provision for the breakfast Aunt Dinah had promised. He was the only reliable one of the party, as all acknowledged when they came back laden with mosses and flowers.

"There is a place for everybody, and a work for everybody," said the fisherman, gravely, thinking of his own restricted powers.

"The trouble is, that so few people fill their place, or do their work," responded Etta. "I have seen enough of the world to know that. If we all did right, what a paradise this would be! It seems to me I have been living very near paradise for the last three weeks," she added. "It seems like a story one reads, without half believing. I expect to wake up and find I have been dreaming."

"You haven't been asleep to-day; you've been talking and laughing all the time," remarked Olly, in a tone of the utmost seriousness; and, of course, the assertion made everybody laugh heartily.

Drifting down the river, with just enough movement of the oars to keep the boat in the channel, they sang as the twilight deepened round them. A quartette of voices, each one clear and distinct, yet blending sweetly and harmoniously.

What could have sent Hiram Dempster into the country that day of all others! He hardly knew himself; yet there he was, standing on the piazza, when the party returned.

Aunt Dinah had wished him "way off on an island jes by himself;" and Mira could have echoed the wish heartily. She loved her father, but she did not wish to see him then. He was smoking, and this annoyed her. She met him, however, with as much cordiality as she could command, introduced him to her friend, and made inquiries for his health.

"I have not been feeling quite well," he replied. "I thought a few days of rest might benefit me; so I came to try the effect of Aunt Dinah's cooking, and my children's company."

As may be supposed, the cigar had been thrown away, and the gentleman had put on his very best manners. These were unexceptionable but with such a face they could never be a passport to favor. The children alone seemed at ease with him.

As usual he had brought the choicest luxuries of the season, and some of these were upon the supper-table. These could not fail to be appreciated; yet they were eaten with far less relish than they would have

been had Etta occupied the seat opposite her friend.

But there sat Hiram Dempster, praising everything indiscriminately, drinking cup after cup of coffee and eating little. He was vexed that his presence should impose a restraint upon his daughter and her guest; more vexed that he could not throw off the consciousness of it.

Etta was demure and quiet; totally unlike her usually brilliant self. Mira's manners were abstracted; and but for the children it would have been difficult to keep up a conversation.

Etta had a prejudice against this man, on Albert's account, and if she could have sent him from her presence would gladly have done so. But he was Mira's father, and immediately she began to wonder if it would be possible to reform him.

She was such a wee bit of a thing, "jes like a butterfly," as Aunt Dinah said; but, as I have before shown, she had a wise little head. She could never approach him di-

rectly, and ask him to give up the use of liquor, — that was settled before she left the table. It occurred to her then, that she was adding to her friend's discomfort by silence, and she made a great effort to resume her usual manners. In this she succeeded so well that the evening passed more pleasantly than had seemed possible.

Mr. Dempster was fond of music, and Etta was a fine pianist. The next morning there were several sheets of new music upon the piano, and as the master of the house was wandering restlessly about he noticed them. He examined the music, and asked Mira if she could play it.

"I have never tried it," was the reply. "It belongs to Etta, and I have not seen it till this morning."

"Ask your friend if she will play some of it," then said her father. "I should be glad to hear something new. By the way, you must give more attention to music. I will ride over and see Professor Atwood this afternoon. If he can give you lessons, I

will provide a way for you to go to him once or twice a week."

Mira expressed her satisfaction with this, and went to call Etta, who was very willing to play new music, or old, as might suit the fancy of her audience. She had played several pieces, when, on taking another sheet, a small roll fell to the floor. Mr. Dempster stooped to pick it up.

"Why, that is Aunt Dinah's pledge!" exclaimed Etta, in a perfectly natural tone. "I wouldn't lose that for a great deal."

"Aunt Dinah's pledge!" repeated the gentleman, as he placed it in her extended hand. "Excuse me, Miss Payne, but I am really curious to know what it can be. I am always interested in everything relating to Aunt Dinah."

"This pledge is no secret," replied Etta; "I am perfectly willing you should see it;" and, untying the scarlet ribbon, she held the roll open before him. Then, as if suddenly remembering something which demanded immediate attention, she left the room, saying,

"I will come back, and finish the music directly."

She was away long enough for him to read the pledge, and draw some conclusions. A faint suspicion crossed his mind that this had intentionally been placed in his way; but the frank, self-possessed manners of the owner put this suspicion to flight.

"Isn't it a nice pledge?" she asked, looking him full in the face; and he could do no less than answer, "*Very* nice."

"Aunt Dinah dictated it, and Rufus wrote it," she continued. "You see there is one blank line. That is for Albert's name."

"Do you think he will sign that paper?" asked Mr. Dempster, more because he knew not what else to say, than from any desire to have the question answered.

"I know he will," replied Etta. "His name is on the original. This is only a copy. I was very anxious to have the original; but Aunt Dinah keeps that for herself. There is room for other names, and I hope to have the paper full some time. My father likes a

glass of wine, and a cigar; but I shall ask him to sign this pledge."

Mr. Dempster breathed more freely. He was no worse than other men, after all, and even if Miss Payne did ask him to write his name under her own, he could decline with tolerable grace.

Such calculations were unnecessary. The young lady had not the slightest idea of asking him to sign the pledge. He had seen it, and she knew he could not forget it. That was sufficient for her present purpose. Taking it from his hand, she carefully rolled it, tied it with the scarlet ribbon, and laid it upon the table.

"Now I will give you some more music," she said, seating herself at the piano.

Marches, waltzes, and bravuras were all the same to her companion. His mind was in a whirl, as she could not fail to know. Yet she played on, as skilfully as though he was giving her his undivided attention. Nevertheless, it was a relief to both, when the children came in, saying they had fin-

ished their lessons, and Sister Mi was going into the garden with them to pick berries.

"Won't you come too, father?" asked Charley; but his father complained of a headache, and preferred to remain in the house.

He seemed to have a fancy for being alone that day. In the afternoon he drove over to Professor Atwood's, leaving his children to wonder why they were not invited. There was just one reason for this. He had not smoked since the evening before, and he would deny himself this luxury no longer. So he took his cigar-case, and left his children.

They, too, sought pleasure in their own way, and on his return he found the house deserted.

"All gone to the woods, and spect they'll stay," said Aunt Dinah, in answer to his questions.

They did stay, until late supper-time, and had marvellous stories to tell of the wonders they had seen.

Mr. Dempster really envied them their

hearty enjoyment of simple delights. "If we could always be young, this would be a happy world," he remarked, smiling at the enthusiasm of his children.

"Do you think it necessary that we should be less happy as we grow older?" asked Etta.

"I think most people *are* less happy," he replied.

"That is because they do wrong; act against their own convictions of duty, and so blunt their sensibilities," responded the young girl, with becoming gravity.

Aunt Dinah, standing behind Mira's chair, gave a nod of approval at this, thinking that the gentleman opposite must needs see the application.

However this might be, he made it the occasion of a compliment to his guest. "If that is the only reason, you will have a life-long lease of happiness," he said.

"I hope so; I intend to be happy and add to the happiness of others." The laugh which enforced this was so low and sweet, that

Charley said it sounded "just like a music-box."

Hiram Dempster was in a most gracious mood during his entire stay; consulting Mira upon many points where before he had only considered his own wishes. He also regarded her feelings and his own appearance so far as to abstain from the use of any intoxicating drink.

Rufus Freeman thought he had really improved. Edgar thought that he had only put on a good coat, which he would take off as soon as he was back in the city. Aunt Dinah was looking into the future; thinking less of this man than of some younger people. "I know all about that boy," she said. "'Pears like" — and here she fell into a fit of musing.

When her father and Etta were both gone, Mira had time to devote to music, in which she had already made commendable proficiency. A large addition had been made to her library; new magazines found their way to the cottage, and the approaching autumn promised to be a pleasant season. For the

books, she was indebted to her father; for the magazines, she might thank others.

Of course, Rufus and Edgar shared the benefit of these; the latter promising himself a rich treat the coming winter. His desire for riches had lost something of its intensity, knowledge seeming to him the greater good.

He was a fine fellow, as everybody said, willing to work, and faithful to the interests of his employer. The pledge he had signed saved him from many temptations. There was no dallying with sin. He resolutely turned his back upon it, and everybody knew that he was in earnest. No one thought of giving him sympathy; he didn't need it, having always been able to help himself. Yet he had some dark thoughts; and as he read of lands where color is no barrier to distinction, he longed to go and try his power with others. But there were his mother and brother; they needed him. So, with a prayer for patience, he went on his way. Alone with books it mattered not whether he was white or black.

Aunt Dinah was ambitious for her children, and she did sometimes wish they could have a fair chance with others. She thought of this more, now that Edgar was old enough to display his mental and physical powers. It required all her faith to say "The good Lord knows best." But she did say it with sincerity. There was coming a greater trial of faith, through this same boy of whom she was so proud. Would she still trust the good Lord?

Edgar Freeman was returning from his day's labor somewhat earlier than usual, when he heard a loud cry. He stopped to listen, when it was repeated. This time he was sure it came from the sand-bank, and started to run in that direction. Continued cries were now heard, and before he reached the bank others were following.

A large excavation had been made that day, and some boys, without thinking of danger, had entered what they called "the cave." Here they worked away to make a smaller cave in the side, and were rejoicing over their

success, when a vigorous blow brought down a shower of sand and stones. One little fellow, who had advanced farthest into the bank, found himself shut out from his companions, and shrieked with terror. The cry was taken up by others, as he made frantic efforts to escape from his prison, each effort only increasing the fall of sand and burying him deeper from their sight.

Edgar was first to reach the place, and, springing into the cave, seized a shovel which had been left by one of the workmen. With this he removed the sand carefully, and the boy was soon liberated, unhurt.

"Hurrah for Edgar Freeman!" shouted one; but, at that moment, several rushed to the edge of the bank, and Edgar was buried from sight.

Others were partly covered; but they were soon relieved. They called the buried boy. There was no answer, and a death-like pallor settled upon all faces. Men and boys were despatched for shovels, while those who remained began to scrape away the sand with

their hands. To their dismay, the whole mass seemed ready to slide.

At length, an old man came who had experience in such matters, and under his direction they worked to better purpose.

The most intense excitement prevailed; the father of the rescued boy offering fifty acres of land to any one who would take out Edgar Freeman alive.

"I'll give another fifty to him too," he added.

Minutes seemed like hours, as the men worked on. One boot was seen, and a shout went up from all present.

"Stand back!" now said the old man. "Stand back!"

Three only continued the work, removing the sand with the utmost care and rapidity. Edgar was lying upon his face, mouth and eyes protected by his hands, with which he had instinctively covered them.

By this time Dr. Waring had arrived, and bent over the motionless body. Removed

from the sand and extended upon the grass, there was no sign of life.

"Is he dead?" asked one and another; but the doctor had no disposition to answer questions.

A faint fluttering of the heart showed that life was not extinct, and, making use of such restoratives as he had at hand, he was soon gratified by seeing the boy open his eyes.

Edgar Freeman was a hero. The first sounds he heard were words of praise and gratitude. He had well earned them. God grant he had not paid too dear a price!

He made an effort to rise, but fell back. "You must wait a little," said the doctor, kindly. "You can't expect to be very strong just at present."

Ill news travels fast. Aunt Dinah heard of the accident, and started at once for the sand-bank. Mira followed, after charging the children not to leave the house; and Rufus vainly tried to keep pace with her. At first she suited her steps to his; but

anxiety for Edgar proved stronger than sympathy for his crippled brother.

Dinah Freeman uttered not a word; but, seating herself upon the grass, took the boy's head in her lap. He reached up his hand to clasp hers, and the bystanders gave them more room. As yet no one knew the extent of the injury received. Mira came up breathless with haste, knelt beside Aunt Dinah, and spoke to Edgar.

"It will be best to take him home," said the doctor. "The sooner the better. He ought not to lie here."

"Help me to my feet," said Edgar; and two strong men gave him the needed assistance.

"Why, you can really stand!" exclaimed Dr. Waring. "That is much better than I feared."

"Yes, and walk too," was the reply of our hero, as he took a few steps, although with evident pain.

Every one was relieved; and Mr. Lambert, standing there, expressed his deep

sense of obligation for the rescue of his son.

"Don't talk about it," said Edgar, wearily. "It wasn't anything to do."

Rufus only caught a glimpse of him, as he was lifted into a wagon; but to know that he was alive was great comfort. By the kindness of a neighbor the brother, with Mira Dempster, reached the cottage in advance of the slowly moving cavalcade.

Edgar was brought in and placed upon the bed, in a room opening from the kitchen. Weak and exhausted by the ride, he was compelled to depend entirely upon the strength of others.

"No bones broken," said Dr. Waring. "You need rest, and you must have it if possible. I will endeavor to send these people away."

Aunt Dinah moved about with compressed lips, Rufus sat by the bed, looking at his brother through tearful eyes. Mira told the children of Edgar's condition; but she did not allow them to go near him.

"I wish I could just see him. I do want to see him," said Charley.

Many wished to see him; and many were denied the privilege. Much sympathy was felt and expressed; quite too much to please the mother, who desired to be left alone with her family.

Edgar complained of a bad feeling in his side; yet he slept most of the night, and in the morning spoke confidently of being at work in a few days. The doctor was not so confident. He hoped for the best; but he told Mira Dempster that he was afraid the boy would never do much more work.

"It isn't necessary to talk about it," he said. "His mother will see it for herself, if such is the case; and no good can come from anticipating trouble."

According to his own account, Edgar sat in state through the day, and received the homage of his friends. Rufus devoted the entire day to him; and the children spent as much time in Aunt Dinah's cottage as their sister would allow.

Mr. Lambert was one of the visitors. In the excitement of the previous afternoon he had said he would give fifty acres of land to Edgar Freeman, and he redeemed the promise. It was no mean gift either. The land was not under cultivation, but it was valuable in itself, and could easily be made productive. A deed of the same had been duly executed, and was now placed in the hands of its new owner.

"I don't wish for this," said Edgar. "There is no reason whatever why you should give it to me, and I really can't take it."

"But the deed is registered," answered Mr. Lambert, "and I must redeem my promise. You had nothing to do with my making it, as you were under ground at the time. You have nothing to do now but accept the land, and make the most of it."

"But —" commenced Edgar.

"There are no buts nor ifs about it," interrupted the visitor. "I have said my say, and am going home."

Suiting the action to the word, he left the house, while Edgar held the deed.

"You can take it, mother," he said. "If I live I shall pay for the land. If not, it may do you some good. I've been thinking that I should like to be a farmer."

"I don't want it," was the reply. "It don't seem to b'long to you. You didn't do nothin' but your duty, boy."

"I know that, mother; but we can settle it some other time. Mr. Lambert means all right, and fifty acres of land isn't much to him."

The whole interest of the two families now centred upon Edgar, who, for many days, seemed to grow neither better nor worse. He walked a little; going out of doors when the weather was fine. The effort, however, was always attended with suffering, and followed by great fatigue.

"I've done most of my walking," he one day said to Mira, when she expressed a hope that he would soon be able to walk more easily. "I haven't talked about it; but I don't

expect to walk much more. Perhaps I shall never come in here again."

He was then in Mira's sitting-room, occupying an easy-chair, and seemed as comfortable as he had been at any time since he was injured.

"I believe you are getting low-spirited," responded his companion. "We must contrive some way to cheer you up, and make you well."

"I should like to get well, if it is for the best. But, as mother says, the good Lord knows; and I am willing it should be as he pleases."

Mira laid down her work. "Don't you expect to get well?" she asked, looking at him earnestly.

He shook his head. "I don't see any prospect of it. The trouble is here," he added, after a short pause, placing his hand on his side. "Something is wrong, and the doctor can't reach it. It seemed to me, at first, that I couldn't die now, but—" Here a great sob burst from him, and he covered his face.

"Forgive me, Miss Mira," he said, as soon as he could speak, "I didn't intend to say anything about this."

"I am very glad that you have," she replied. "Albert is anxious to know just how you are."

"I wish I could see him once more," said her companion. Albert was informed of this wish, and in a few days visited his friends with Dr. Wilson, when Edgar gave them so cordial and cheerful a greeting, they thought it impossible that he was making ready to die. But they were soon undeceived. His life might be prolonged for weeks, perhaps months; yet there was no prospect of recovery. A consultation of physicians was held, without deciding upon any new course of treatment. All had been done which could be done.

Dinah Freeman knew this. She had seen too much of sickness and suffering to be easily deceived, and she was the first to be convinced that her boy must die. It was hard to give him up; but so that his soul was

saved, she would try to bow in submission.

She had not yet been able to command herself sufficiently to speak to him upon the subject; but Dr. Wilson talked with him, and obtained a frank expression of feeling.

"I don't fear what will come after death," said Edgar. "I know I have done wrong; but ever since mother made me lay my hand on the Bible, and give her a promise, I have felt my accountability to God. I have asked him to forgive my sins, and I believe that he has. I am sorry to leave mother and Rufus. They need me; but the good Lord can provide for them in his own way."

This was not said connectedly, as I have written it, but at different times, in the course of conversation; and it seemed to him who heard it, that the speaker's hope of a glorious immortality rested upon a sure foundation.

Rufus had no heart to work, when once assured that his brother must die. The light of his own life seemed going out. His

brother was his pride and dependence. "Why couldn't it be me, a crooked, useless stick, instead of him?" murmured the deformed man.

"I suppose it's all right," said the old man, who directed the efforts for Edgar's release from a living grave,—"I suppose it's all right; but I can't help thinking that the boy he saved may be nothing more than a curse to the whole community. His father aint bringing him up right. Ten chances to one but he'll make a drunkard."

These remarks reached the ear of Edgar Freeman, and caused him no little anxiety. He had saved the boy from physical death. Who would save him from moral death?

Edgar was debating this question, when Mr. Lambert came in. As this was his first call, after he knew there was no hope of the young man's recovery, he was deeply moved.

"What can I do for you?" he asked. "Anything I have is at your service."

"I have all that I need," was the reply. "My friends are very kind. But I have

been thinking of Willie, and I want you to make him a good man."

"I will try," responded Mr. Lambert. "If he grows up to be as good as you are, I shall be satisfied. I guess your mother knows how to train boys better than I do."

"Mother understands boys pretty well," said Edgar. "She got me to sign a pledge of good behavior more than a year ago, and I haven't broken it yet."

"What was the pledge?"

"Perhaps she will let you see it;" and directly the mother was called.

This pledge, which she intended to keep a family secret, had been too often seen for her to demur now; and, moreover, she would grant any request made by her son.

Mr. Lambert read it, with the names attached. "That's a remarkable document," he said, musingly. "If my boy was to sign that, and stick to it, he'd make a good man."

"The chances would be in his favor."

"That's what they would. But I'll never ask my boy to sign a paper I won't sign

myself. 'Twould be a tough job for me to keep those conditions."

"I wish you would, both of you, sign that pledge," said Edgar, with some hesitation.

"Do you wish so? Would it make you any happier?" eagerly asked his companion.

"Yes, sir; indeed it would," was the quick response.

"Then here goes," said Mr. Lambert; and, seizing a pen from the table near him, he wrote his name without further consideration. "I'll take Willie over to-morrow."

"Spect that man didn't think what he's 'bout," exclaimed Aunt Dinah, after he had gone. "'Pears like he's crazy."

It appeared somewhat so to himself, as he thought the matter over, on his way home; but he knew he *could* keep the pledge, and for Willie's sake he *would*.

XI.

The time of trial passed,
Life's problem solved, at last,
To Him who rules the skies
We look with streaming eyes,
And say, as words may tell,
"He doeth all things well."

Edgar Freeman died with the year. As the clock struck twelve, his mother, bending over him, whispered, "He is gone,—gone to that land where color is no barrier to distinction; gone where there is neither sorrow nor suffering." This was no cause for grief; yet never was son and brother more sincerely mourned.

Many were present at the funeral; the gray-haired clergyman who had, a few days before, administered the sacrament to the young man, officiating at his burial.

Mr. Dempster and Albert Wilson were there, and together looked down into the open grave. There they met upon common

ground, and whatever of unpleasant feeling there might have been between them in the past, it was there ignored, as each dropped a tear to the memory of him who had left them.

The children wept as for a dear brother. Rufus refused to be comforted; but the mother went back to her accustomed duties subdued and sorrowful, yet sometimes smiling as she thought of her boy safe home.

They all missed his glad shouts and cheery whistle; missed, too, his ready hand and vigorous arm. But still the world moved on. Spring came again, with flowers and sunshine and singing of birds. These had been welcomed with rejoicing in the years gone by; but now a spell seemed to rest upon the two cottages which stood in such close proximity.

Mira Dempster sympathized with Aunt Dinah, who feared that she must soon resign her last child. From the day of his brother's death Rufus had drooped. For a while he compelled himself to labor; but this

became too much of an effort for his failing strength, and the shop was closed.

Dr. Waring was called, and after some conversation with the invalid shook his head ominously.

"You can't do much for me," said Rufus; "but it will please mother to have you try. I am ready to take anything you may prescribe; but this poor body is almost worn out. Since Edgar died I have thought more about heaven than I ever did before; and it seems to me I shall be there with him very soon. I don't think I shall be crooked in heaven, do you, doctor?" he said, after a short pause.

The doctor had given more thought to this world than to the world beyond; more to bodies mortal than to bodies immortal; yet he did not hesitate to assure Rufus that there could be no deformity in heaven.

In midsummer a new grave was opened in the village church-yard, and Dinah Freeman was written childless.

It would be useless to recount the last

words. These are always such as touch the deepest fountains of the heart, and linger in the memory long after the lips which uttered them are cold in death. Blessed words they were in this instance, uttered as the spirit, leaving its earthly tenement, had a vision of the heavenly mansions which Christ has prepared for those who love him.

"'Pears like I can't never forget them words," said Aunt Dinah, speaking to Mira. "I hear 'em in my sleep, and I don't want my boys back. O honey, chile, it's a great thing to get safe home to glory."

"What a happy family you will be!" responded Mira.

"Yes, chile, I spect it. Them boys' father was a Christian, and I tries to do my duty. 'Pears like we'll all sing glory to God when I gets through."

Aunt Dinah had now but one family to care for, and her own kitchen was nearly deserted. She sat down there occasionally, but there was no fire in the stove, and no work about the room.

The land which Mr. Lambert had given to Edgar came into her possession, and after an ineffectual attempt to restore it to its rightful owner she disposed of it, and invested the proceeds in bank stock. Everybody was ready to do her a favor, and she had no lack of friends.

"She is well off," said the same old man who has before been introduced to my readers. "Her boys never could done what they wanted to, on account of their color, and 'twas a mercy to take them out of the world. Edgar did a good job before he died, and I guess Lambert'll hold out in the way he's begun. Willie has signed the pledge too. It's wonderful how things come round when there's a Christian somewhere praying."

Edgar Freeman earnestly desired to make his mark in the world, and he had been permitted to do so; not in the way he would have chosen, but in the way which seemed best to Him who sees the end from the beginning.

Mr. Lambert made no secret of the fact

that he and his boy had signed Aunt Dinah's pledge. They were going to keep it too; so there was a prospect that Willie would make a good and useful man.

Two deaths, under such peculiar circumstances in a family so intimately connected with his own, appealed strongly to Hiram Dempster; and all the more since no one seemed to expect they would have any influence upon him.

He continued his business, and was fast becoming a wealthy man; yet the thought of this gave him less pleasure than formerly. Conscience reminded him that there would come a day of reckoning; and a new movement among the friends of temperance called his attention to the subject.

Yet all this did not prevent his drinking and gambling as usual. The force of habit was very strong; and, moreover, he sought by indulgence to stifle his convictions of duty.

His children were safe from the contamination of his example. Aunt Dinah and Mira

would keep close watch of Charley; and he doubted not that by and by his boy's name would be affixed to the magic pledge.

Thus he threw his own responsibilities upon others, never thinking that Mira might choose to assume new relations. To him she was only a child, although he had demanded from her the matureness of a woman.

She was presented to him in a new light when Dr. Wilson asked her hand in marriage.

His first impulse was to declare that she was quite too young to think of marriage; his second, that she could not leave the children. Then he considered the matter calmly. He was averse to having any relations with the Wilson family, and wished this young physician had never seen his daughter.

He could not undertake the management of those children, and it was no use to think of it. He was not a suitable person to have the care of children, and he knew it. What was to be done?

He went to his country home, thinking all the way what a miserable thing it was for a man to make himself a dangerous companion for his own children. He would rather lay Charley in the grave than have him grow up to be a swearing, smoking, drinking gambler.

He knew that the character of Dr. Wilson was above suspicion. He might make all the inquiries he pleased, and present the matter in every conceivable light, there could be but one result, as he was soon forced to acknowledge.

The following autumn, Dr. Wilson commenced house-keeping, with Mira as mistress of the establishment. At least this was the position she seemed to occupy, while in fact she had delegated her power to Dinah Freeman.

"Spect I shall go, sir," she said to Dr. Wilson, when he asked her to come to his home. "'Pears like I've nothin' left but them children."

So with the children she went, and the lit-

tle brown cottage was sold, with its more pretentious neighbor.

It was very hard to leave this cottage in which she had spent so many years of her life; hard, too, for the children to feel that their long walks over the hills, and their short walks in the garden, were all in the past.

Charley thought of the crickets. "Do you suppose there will be any in the doctor's house?" he asked of Olly one evening, when the dwellers of the hearth were giving one of their most artistic concerts.

"I don't know, but I am afraid not," was the reply.

"Perhaps I can find some, and carry there," said the boy, as he laid his head again upon the low footstool, that he might catch every flourish of the skilful musicians.

"Dear Hippety hoppety, I am going to leave you," he murmured later, when sleep was hanging her tiny weights upon his eyelids.

It was a large new house where Charley

went, with not a cricket to be heard in it. Sister Mi was Mrs. Wilson; and the doctor always kissed her whenever he went out or came in.

"Quite a large family to commence with, and a very charming family too," said the doctor's friends.

Mr. Dempster had given his daughter a generous outfit, in addition to the property which was her mother's. He also provided most generously for the expenses of his younger children; paying more into the general fund than his son-in-law considered just.

"Let us not quarrel about it," said the father. "I am willing to pay something for having them under good influences; and I shall expect you to make Charley just such a man as he should be."

"He will naturally look to you more than to me," was the reply. "A father's influence is very great; but while Mira has the care of Charley, I shall endeavor to assist in training him for usefulness, and consequently happi-

ness. A useless man is never happy, as of course you know."

This was not the reply Hiram Dempster wished or expected. It was far from pleasant to be thus reminded of a responsibility which he had fancied transferred to others; and he could not but suspect that his son-in-law had a purpose in so doing. Yet it would be impolitic to acknowledge this; and, making some careless remark, he introduced another subject of conversation.

His children disposed of, there was nothing to distract his attention from business. He at once resolved upon the acquisition of a fixed amount of property; after which he would retire from active life and enjoy the fruits of his labors.

Aunt Dinah still prayed for him with unwavering faith. "Spect the day'll come, honey," she said to Mira, "spect it sure, when that man'll repent. I've seen most everything, and I spect to see that."

But to his daughter this day seemed far off. He was an unprincipled man, with enough

of good breeding to regard the customs or prejudices of those with whom he associated. In Dr. Wilson's house he neither smoked nor drank wine; yet the abstinence was followed by indulgence elsewhere.

Mira was now where she saw her Cousin Albert almost daily. Etta Payne, too, was one of her frequent guests, light-hearted and merry as ever, although looking forward to woman's lot and woman's cares.

Her pledge had received several new signatures since it came into her possession. Among these was Albert's, underscored as in the original, and she knew his pledge had not been broken. Never off his guard, he had met and resisted temptations to which one of less decision would have yielded. This he had done with the prayer, "Lead us not into temptation," constantly in his heart and often upon his lips. Regretting the years he had worse than wasted, he wished to save other boys from making a similar waste of precious time.

"Boys must learn by experience," said an

older man when talking of this subject. "They must sow their wild oats, and it's of no use trying to hold them with too tight a rein."

"Then you think they must swear, must smoke, and must drink," replied Albert Wilson.

"I don't know as there is any must about it; but you will acknowledge that a great many boys who do all of these make very smart men."

"And you *must* acknowledge that a large proportion of them make very *bad* men. No one can habitually take the name of God in vain, without losing all reverence for his Maker."

"Yes, I suppose that is true; and swearing is poor business any way. I don't uphold anybody in doing it, although I am guilty of it myself sometimes, — a habit acquired when I was a boy; and now I can't seem to get rid of it. But there is smoking; I don't believe in that hurting anybody, unless they carry it to excess. A good cigar is pleasant company

and helps to drive away the blues. But I believe you don't smoke; so you are not a judge."

"I did smoke. I have been a most *inveterate* smoker, and know all the pleasure to be derived from a good cigar."

"Well, you must acknowledge that is a good deal."

"I used to think so; but there are better ways of spending time and money. Looking at it in the abstract, burning tobacco isn't very dignified employment for an intelligent man, and *chewing* tobacco is still worse. If any one wants a clear head and vigorous body he had better let it alone."

"There is such a thing as using tobacco in excess; but I am sure that a little does me good. I feel the better for it."

"Do you know how you should feel without it?" asked Albert, laughing.

"Well, well. That's a pretty hard question," replied the man, taking off his hat and running his fingers through his hair. "I've used tobacco ever since I was a boy, and I

shouldn't know how to get along without it. My stomach requires it."

"You could tell better about that after living six months without it," said his companion.

"Perhaps you are right; and I am willing to own that I hope my boys will never touch it. They never will if their mother can help it. She hates the weed."

"As every woman should," heartily responded Albert. "The only wonder to me is, that they tolerate its use and its filthiness. Then it leads to the use of intoxicating drinks, and this is its worst feature."

"Ha! You have reached the last of the three habits, and I suppose you will condemn this unqualifiedly."

"Indeed I shall."

"And I shall agree with you so far as temperance is concerned," responded the gentleman. "There is nothing more disgusting than the presence of a drunken man; but an occasional glass of wine or brandy exhilarates the spirits, and promotes health."

I will not transcribe the arguments for and against the use of stimulants. They were such as are constantly offered by the opposing parties on this great question. The gentleman who believed in use, and not abuse, at length acknowledged that there was great danger of exceeding the bounds of moderation.

"Then why incur that danger?" asked his companion. "Why not keep on the safe side? One who abstains altogether will never become a drunkard; and for many there is no middle ground."

Albert Wilson could never see a boy using tobacco without wishing to speak a word of remonstrance; and not one who came under his immediate influence but was warned of its evils. For Charley Dempster he was particularly anxious, and, mindful of his promise to Mira, he lost no opportunity for impressing upon her brother's mind the sinfulness of those habits which are making so many boys pests in the community.

Charley was only eight years of age when

he signed Aunt Dinah's pledge, fully comprehending to what he thus bound himself.

"Now I can't ever get that name off," he said, looking at his signature.

"No, chile, never! Ole auntie keep this jes long's she live, and that name be right there all time."

"Shall you want to get it off?" asked Olly, who had written her own name directly under that of her brother.

"No, I shan't," he answered, decidedly. "It would be telling a lie; and I don't mean to tell a lie."

Etta Payne compared her pledge with Aunt Dinah's, saying, as she did so, "There are two more signatures we must have; you must manage to get Hiram Dempster's, and I must lay siege to father. I don't think there is any danger that father will be a drunkard, but I want his influence on the right side. I am determined to have it too."

This young girl was reasonably sure to

accomplish whatever she attempted; it being a common remark among her friends that what she couldn't do in one way she would in another.

A few weeks before her marriage her parents and herself were invited to dine at the house of a friend, who made most generous provision for the entertainment of his guests. Several others were present, and among them a young man who had given his friends great cause for anxiety on account of his convivial habits.

The dinner was sumptuous in all its appointments; the wine and champagne worthy the connoisseur who had selected them. Etta was troubled; yet it was no time to preach temperance more than could be done by example and playful remarks to the young man at her side. Yet these accomplished much good. He drank sparingly, and rose from the table with a clear head.

"Young Jenkins' mother ought to thank you for a sober driver home, this evening," said Mr. Payne to his daughter, after their

return from the dinner-party. "If it hadn't been for you, he would have drank three times what he did. I always tremble for him, — such a fine fellow too. It is a shame that he don't control himself better."

"More shame that people should put wine in his way, and even urge him to drink it, when they know his weakness; and it seems to me something of a shame that older and professedly good men should drink in his presence."

"Because I drink *one* glass of wine, another man is not obliged to drink three," responded the father, perceiving at once the point of his daughter's remarks.

"Certainly not," answered Etta. "But the fact that you drink *one* glass shows that you approve of wine-drinking, and your influence is in favor of it."

"There is nobody like you," exclaimed Mr. Payne, with as much impatience as it was possible for him to feel with his darling child. "If you once get fairly going on a subject, there is no such thing as stopping you.

These notions of total abstinence, which have somehow found lodgment in your brain, are a trial to me. If you were only satisfied to keep them to yourself, I could have more patience with them."

"But it is not right for me to hide my light under a bushel. I want it to shine for the benefit of my friends, and for you in particular."

"Benefit!" repeated the father, smiling. "I have no peace of my life. When you are gone I shall —"

"Don't say you shall be glad," interrupted Etta, playfully. "I know you will miss me."

"To be sure I shall. How could I fail to miss my little preacher?"

"What a name for me, father! The idea of my being a preacher! how ridiculous!" and Etta's musical laugh was more prolonged than usual.

"I think the name fits you," was her father's reply. "You hold forth on your favorite subject, and then you make the application

direct and pointed. If that is not preaching, what is it?"

"If I could only preach so that people would heed, I would turn preacher for the rest of my life," mused Etta, when alone.

"There is sense in the girl's preaching, after all," mused the father. "I suppose I *could* give up wine and cigars, and I *would* do it this very day, if I had boys to bring up."

There was a widowed mother not far away, who had an only child, dear to her as any son could have been to Mr. Payne. She had endeavored to train him wisely; but the example of others had done much to destroy the effect of her precepts.

Such men as Mr. Payne drank wine. Why should not he? They certainly would not do it if it was wrong. Thus reasoned George Jenkins; and thus reason many others, quoting the example of respectable moderate drinkers in justification of their own intemperate habits.

The time for Etta Payne's marriage drew

near. She was to become the wife of Albert Wilson, who, as a young man bound to rise in the world, would be an acceptable son-in-law to her father. There must be a grand wedding with its usual accompaniments, and the arrangements for this were subjects of frequent discussion.

"What, no wine at your wedding!" exclaimed Mr. Payne. "I shall have a word to say about that; and, as I provide the entertainment, I must insist upon furnishing what I please. We *must* have wine."

Etta had expected something like this when she broached the subject; but she knew her power, and did not hesitate to wield it. As a consequence, nothing stronger than tea and coffee was provided for the guests, although the relatives knew that Uncle John had made a purchase of choice liquors for this very occasion.

After a few weeks devoted to travel and sight-seeing, the young couple commenced house-keeping in the same neighborhood with Dr. Wilson. This was mutually pleasant

for the cousins; and a constant interchange of calls and civilities strengthened their friendship.

Aunt Dinah received her share of attention, being often consulted by Etta upon matters which old house-keepers understand so much better than those just commencing. Their conversation, however, was not confined to any one subject. They talked of temperance and religion, as well as of cooking. The pledge formed a strong bond of union between them.

"Spect I'll get that bad man's name some time," said Aunt Dinah, speaking of Mr. Dempster. "Spect I will, sure."

There seemed little prospect of this; yet there was not a day when the man did not think seriously of his duty. At length an appeal was made to him, which moved him deeply.

A young man, who, by the death of his father, had come into possession of quite a fortune, was a constant visitant to the gambling-rooms of which Hiram Dempster & Co.

were the proprietors. There he played for amusement, with only enough at stake to give zest to the game, until he became an expert. Of course he drank wine and champagne, as did all who visited those rooms. Occasionally he indulged in something stronger; yet he was considered a respectable young man, and in no particular danger from these habits.

Here he read the daily papers, smoked and chatted, finding life very pleasant. Not decided as to business, and, having no regular occupation, he spent more and more time at the gaming-table. One day, having lost a considerable sum of money, and being determined to win it back, he continued to play until wine and excitement made him reckless. He lost again, and rose from the table angry at his ill-luck; but the next morning, being cool and wary, he recovered all he had lost.

"You draw a prize to-day," remarked one of his companions. "So it is; down to-day and up to-morrow. Life is only a lottery, and we take our chance as it comes."

A great mistake. It was not *chance* which made this young man a gambler. It was not *chance* which led him to risk his fortune, until, in an evil hour, the whole was pledged as security for a debt of honor.

This was but the result of a long series of events in which he had acted freely. Had he pursued a different course, the result would have been different.

When his last dollar had been staked and lost, he rushed from the rooms in a frenzy of remorse and grief. Mr. Dempster, noticing his excited appearance, and fearing that he might be tempted to some rash act, followed him immediately. The young man had only reached home, and closed the door behind him, when Mr. Dempster himself sought admittance.

"I wish to see your son," he said, when ushered into the presence of a dignified elderly woman.

"I think he is not in the house," was her reply.

"I saw him enter a moment ago," re-

sponded the visitor. "My business is urgent, and I wish to have a few minutes' conversation with him as soon as may be."

A troubled look overspread the woman's face; yet she answered, calmly, "I will see myself if he is in his room."

Hiram Dempster was not a person whom she wished her son to see; yet something in his manner constrained her to give him attention. She went up the stairs, and knocked at the door of her son's room. There was no reply, and upon trial she found that the door was securely locked.

"I will open the door directly," said a husky voice, and the next moment the key was turned.

Mr. Dempster wishes to see you, and—" here the mother interrupted herself exclaiming, "What can be the matter with you! O James, when will you be persuaded to give up drinking?"

"I *have* given it up, mother. I shall never drink any more liquor so long as I live."

"Then there is hope for you. I must stop a while and talk about it."

"Not now, mother. My room is in disorder; and, besides, you said Mr. Dempster wished to see me."

"He can wait; and the disorder of your room makes no difference to me. I *must* come in," she added, as by some movement of her son she was able to see the table and its contents. "I *must* come in."

Before he could prevent it she had entered the room, caught a pistol from the table, and, springing to an open window, dropped it into a clump of shrubbery beneath.

"What would you do, my son?" she exclaimed, confronting him; and the words had hardly passed her lips, when he fell heavily to the floor.

While this scene was transpiring, Mr. Dempster had in his impatience opened the hall door, so that the movements above could be distinctly heard. A terrible fear took possession of him. Was the young man

dead? It was with difficulty that he restrained himself from mounting the stairs.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, and still he received no message. He tried to read; but found it impossible. His whole life passed in review before him, and like an accusing angel stood over against him the record of his misdeeds.

Half an hour, and then a slow, weary step was heard on the stairs.

"My son cannot see you to day," said the mother. "He is not well. If you have any message for him I will deliver it."

She remained standing while saying this, evidently expecting that the gentleman would leave at once. But something detained him.

"I thought, perhaps I might be of service. Young men are hasty and—" Having said this much, Mr. Dempster was unable to complete his sentence.

"It is such as you who have brought my son to his present condition," responded the mother, sorrowfully. "Having left his whole

fortune in your *respectable rooms*, it might seem that you would be satisfied."

The stinging emphasis upon the words, "respectable rooms," was terrible to the listener.

"Believe me, madam, I am very sorry for your son," he at length found voice to say.

"I came to tell him this, and endeavor to make some restitution."

"Restitution!" repeated the woman, with such bitter scorn that Hiram Dempster trembled. "Give me back my son innocent as he was before such as you had lured him to sin, and you are welcome to his money. O man, have you a son? If so, for his sake, may God pity you, and bring you to repentance. My boy is all I have."

The speaker was a woman of wonderful self-control; but here she broke down utterly. Up to this time she had been standing. Weakness now compelled her to sit.

"What more can you wish to say to me?" she asked, when she had recovered self-pos-

session. "Our interview has been sufficiently long."

Still Mr. Dempster would not leave without making another effort to convince her that his errand was one of kindness. At first she listened incredulously, afterwards with interest when assured that he was sincere.

"If you are truly sorry for the evil which has been done, you will prove it by your future life. Would you wish your son to spend his time in such rooms as you open to young men?"

This was the question the heart-broken mother had asked, and which rang in his ears as he trod the familiar streets.

Upon his return to the "respectable rooms," he found that the young man's sudden exit had been the subject of general conversation; some expressing the belief that there had been unfair play.

"Takes every cent he had," said one.

"A hard case," said another.

"You all seem wonderfully interested," sneered a middle-aged man, who counted his

gains as others lost. "Any one can have my claims against that fellow for half their real value."

"Done!" exclaimed Hiram Dempster, instantly. "I will take them, and give you my check which the bank will discount at sight."

"Here they are," was the reply, as several papers were taken from a well-filled pocket-book, and placed upon the table.

The exchange was quickly made; and before night the papers were returned to the young man whose signature they bore. There was a fine opportunity to make money; but, under the circumstances, it offered no temptation to the liquor-dealer. For once he rejoiced in performing a generous act; but the end was not yet.

The next morning he astonished his partners by announcing his determination to dispose of his share in the business of the firm. They objected to this; but he insisted, and a settlement was made. He then went to visit his children.

Such rejoicing as there was! Aunt Dinah

threw up her hands, shouting, "Bless de good Lord! I knew 'twould come, honey, I knew sure."

Dr. Wilson frankly expressed his gratification; and Albert, who was now on good terms with his former guardian, congratulated him upon having relinquished a disgraceful business.

It was reserved for Etta, however, to say more than even his own daughter. She was a great favorite with her uncle, as she called Mr. Dempster, and presumed much upon his regard for her.

"There is one thing more you must do, and I know you will," she added, after saying again and again how glad she was for what he had already done.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Sign Aunt Dinah's pledge," answered Etta, looking at him earnestly to see what effect her words produced.

He was not quite ready to do this; but promised to think of it. A few days after this Charley presented the pledge itself,

having obtained the loan of it for this very purpose.

"There is my name, father, and I want you to write yours under it. Sister Mi says this is going to make me a good man, and you are a good man, father."

The confidence thus manifested touched his heart. Charley had provided pen and ink, and he could invent no plausible excuse for not complying with his request. A few hasty strokes, and he was committed for life.

"There! I told Aunt Dinah you would sign it," exclaimed the boy, triumphantly. "I must go and tell her this minute;" and away ran the boy, pledge in hand, to report his success.

To his great surprise Aunt Dinah began to cry as soon as she heard the good news.

"Why, I thought you would be glad," he said.

"Yes, chile, 'pears like I'm too glad," sobbed the poor woman.

Everybody was thankful and happy; yet it was not thought best to say much about

this. Mira felt that her mother's prayers were answered, and her own anxiety well repaid.

Not long after this Etta exhibited her pledge, with the additional signature she had so long sought to obtain. Her father had at length yielded to her solicitations and his own convictions of duty.

Mr. Dempster thought he could be happy to spend his life quietly with his children; but he was soon undeceived. He needed something to occupy his time, and once more engaged in business. The blessing of God rested upon him; and this blessing he devoutly acknowledged. He became a good man, sincerely repenting for the sins of his past life.

Ten years passed, when, by a series of events which no one could foresee or prevent, he lost property to the exact amount of what he had amassed in the liquor traffic. Far from mourning over this as might have been expected, he seemed actually to rejoice.

"Charley is safe now," he said to his son-

in-law. "I have always expected to receive some punishment, and have feared it would come through Charley. The money has gone, and now I believe the boy is safe."

This magic pledge! No words profane,
Nor vile tobacco's poison stain,
Pollute the lips of those who sign it;
No wine, nor brandy, rum, nor gin,
Becloud their brain, or lure to sin.
Then shame to him who dares malign it.

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